



Das Blog

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The Decency of Child Removal



The Trump regime's policy of taking away the children of "illegal immigrants" and locking them in cages, warehouses and "tent cities" is a monstrosity even by the standards of criminality-in-governance to which we have become accustomed over the past year and a half. The children include breastfeeding babies, toddlers, the blind and the terrified. They have no idea where their parents are or whether they will see them again. Parents have been thrust into a parallel ignorance of their children's whereabouts; at least one parent has committed suicide. We have been given multiple and incoherent explanations and justifications: that this policy is "punishment" for people who have committed a crime by entering the country illegally, that it will deter those contemplating illegal entry, that it will pressure the Democratic Party into making a "deal" with Trump that presumably includes funding his wall, that this is a sign of "toughness" or "zero tolerance" in the pursuit of the national interest, that the regime is merely enforcing a settlement reached by the Clinton administration in 1997 and a law passed by the Bush administration in 2008. None of that disguises the basic reality of the torture of children and their parents. Even without rehashing old arguments about the banality of evil, we can see that this evil is recognizably banal, perpetrated by "working people" who are simply "doing their jobs." The concept of "working people," in America as in Germany in the 1930s, is itself a nugget of evil banality, closely aligned with a vision of decency centered on conformity and exclusion.

If we go beyond the banality and ask where it is coming from, we can identify a crisis of aesthetics and history. This is not the first time that the US government (or any other government) has tormented children. We can point to the accelerated deportations initiated by the Obama administration, the devastating effects on Iraqi children of the Clinton-Albright sanctions, and the bombing of civilians in a state of war that is chronic rather than episodic.

Those crimes cannot be detached from the current horror of the deliberate targeting of families, and they can be only partially differentiated as “collateral damage,” since collateral damage is only a partial disavowal of intent. It is also easy to see the wider range of historical precedents, from the taking of Native American children and the breakup through sale of slave families, to instances that do not involve children directly, such as Guantanamo and Abu Ghraib. We can see the continuity in the deployment of rhetoric such as “tough on crime” and “zero tolerance,” which have become not only politically advantageous but also self-evidently desirable: the discourse of common sense. When this is common sense, it becomes possible for otherwise reasonable and decent people to believe that the University of California reserves two-thirds of its funded admissions for the children of illegal immigrants. At that point, what Trump does to children and their parents becomes forgivable. These developments are all national crimes, in the sense that they are part of the fabric of our nationhood. It is not entirely honest to say, as some critics of Trump have been saying out of a sincerely outraged decency, that child-removal is un-American, or “This is not who we are.”

All the same, some aspects of the current atrocity are unprecedented. Trump is a uniquely horrifying phenomenon in American history, and not simply because his regime is a political calamity that will leave a legacy of damage. It, and he, inspire in critics a visceral revulsion akin to the revulsion that Idi Amin and Caligula once inspired with their rumors of cannibalism, bestiality and incest. The rumors may or may not have been literally true, but their source is real enough. It is the revulsion that comes from encountering the human animal in its grossest form, composed entirely of fleshy appetites and impulses: the mindless, soulless, shameless lunging for food, sex, instant gratification and dominance that one accepts in pigs and tolerates in children, but recoils from when it appears in human adults. It is repulsive not simply because of what it is, but also because of what it is not, for this pathological excess of urges that come from the gut is also the total absence of empathy, reason and reflection. These are people who cannot even fake an apology, let alone repent. When dealing with those who supposedly defecate in toilets of gold even as they order that frightened toddlers be held by the state but not held by humans, the principle of “appealing to the humanity of the evil-doer” that one associates with Gandhi or Jesus breaks down, leaving us with a bare cupboard of countermeasures. Revulsion is all we have to begin with.

Under the circumstances, we must recognize first of all the broad complicity of our society, including its “decent” actors and elements, in vicious and often illegal practices that have not been confronted and punished. Obama did not punish the torturers from the Bush administration, Nixon placed Lieutenant Calley in comfortable house arrest, Ford pardoned Nixon, and Trump has already turned the presidential pardon into an instrument of witness tampering. The failures to confront and punish have preserved in American governance a bipartisan zone of extra-legality that is not just useful to the powerful but constitutive of power itself. Within the state and civil society, a tacit consensus has emerged that this extra-legality is itself legitimate and governance must transcend legality: authority cannot be limited by law, including not only international law (which is blocked by national sovereignty), but also the law of the land in question. Since the state supposedly acts in the name of the people, the patriotic citizen can and must accept that legality is not necessary for legitimacy, which can come instead from the transferred will – i.e., the identity expressed in the community of the nation-state – of the patriot, who can be either actively supportive or passively tolerant of government action. That is, obviously, an inherently fascist principle. One does not need a “fascist state” to confirm its operation, but its existence makes it easier for the state to accommodate fascism.

In freeing governance and legitimacy from legality, a basic liberal principle has been suspended and its associated institutions corroded, the suspension hidden and the corrosion justified by the expectation that decent people can be counted on to do the decent thing without the need for legal consequences. Thus, the Bush-Cheney torturers could be forgiven as fundamentally decent “working people” who would not do it again, since a decent leadership would not tell them to do it again. But when political leadership is reliant on the presumption that legality does not fully apply to governance, and that government must keep in reserve (if not in active deployment) the power to act without restraint, decency becomes quite compatible with conduct that might otherwise be illegal and punishable. Not only does the temptation to exceed the law become irresistible, the law itself becomes inapplicable; it withers away, leaving behind a trace or shell. The shell is not without its uses, but the utility is the hollowness itself. For instance, the 1997 and 2008 laws that the Trump regime has used to justify its recent actions do not, in fact, require border authorities to separate children from their parents. Citing them is an obfuscation and a ritual of legitimacy, underlining the useful emptiness of law in governance.

We must recognize, second, that our current predicament is not a problem of universal corruption, in which one set of leaders and followers are as malevolent as another. Obama, Clinton and Ford were all recognizably “decent” politicians. That decency was not fake or meaningless: it meant, for instance, that they would not have ordered the kidnapping of children, or even the torture of adults. They were empathetic, capable of feeling remorse for the harm they did more or less accidentally. The same understanding of decency, however, also allowed them to *tolerate* kidnapping, torture and drone attacks as behavior that can be accommodated within the extralegal space of governance, to bury the photographs from Abu Ghraib, to refuse to see (and even more pertinently, to show, because that would bring legality into play) what they would not themselves have done while declining to strengthen the institutions that might have prevented Trump from doing what is so indecent that it can only be called obscene.

We cannot, in other words, count on decency to prevent indecency, or to keep the truly pathological from abusing of the machinery of government. It is essential that we see the Trump phenomenon not only as a freakish malignancy, but also as the consequence of a reactionary decency that we have already normalized, and that enables forms of racism, fascism and assorted cruelty that we have already woven into our sense of who and what we are as a political community. It must, in the longer term, be uprooted or at least confronted if this is not to happen again. It is not a coincidence that “zero tolerance” is the signature phrase of this evil.

Finally, it is useful to recall what the author of the notion of the banality of evil wrote about forgiveness. In the follow-up to her work on totalitarianism, Hannah Arendt described forgiveness as a central aspect of freedom: it is, she suggested, an act that disrupts the causality of offense and retaliation (karma, a Hindu might say), and thus makes human initiative in history possible. It is an elegant argument, but it makes sense only in a context where the offender is potentially penitent and forgiveness is accompanied by systemic corrections, and I do not mean the feel-good pabulum of *si se puede* chants. It has been possible to forgive Germans for their crimes of decency because the Nazi leadership was punished, and because the children of the followers went beyond decency and became, very substantially, a different kind of political community. Until the current American regime is recognized and treated as what they are – which is a collection of criminals – and concrete steps are taken to make it legally impossible to

get away with what they have done, talk of forgiveness, accommodation, compromise, civility or decency would be fundamentally indecent.

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Murder and Memory



In a lodge outside [Namib-Naukluft](#) National Park, I chatted with the Herero bartender about tribes, politics and mass murder in Namibia. She was surprised (and probably amused) by my interest, and gave me a free beer. Later that day, I saw her serving dinner to a table full of German men: solid, middle-aged, Middle European types on a group Urlaub. No one looked awkward or apologetic, and nobody mentioned genocide. It was an ordinary transaction between a waitress and diners, or rather between a local and tourists in a Third World country, and it was the ordinariness that made me

recoil, because it represented two distinct cultures of forgetfulness: one of the community of killers, and another of the killed.

In the first years of the twentieth century, in what is now Namibia, German forces killed about a hundred thousand Herero and Nama people on the basis of ethnicity. Lothar von Trotha, the senior commander in the colony, made a decision to exterminate the tribes, which had risen in rebellion against the inescapable curtailment of their political autonomy and territory, the rampant use of slave labor by the colonial regime, and the growing pressure of white settlement. With the support of the government in Berlin, von Trotha's troops shot and hanged the males from teenagers up, shot some of the women and younger children as well, chased the rest into the desert, and prevented them from accessing the water holes. Most of those who survived the bullets died of hunger and thirst. Von Trotha's orders regarding the shooting of women and children were ambiguous: on the one hand, he worried that such shootings would injure 'the good reputation of the German soldier' (a notion that had not yet acquired its heavy coat of irony), and gallantly suggested that firing over their heads might suffice to frighten them to death. On the other, he was clear about his goal: he was engaged in a 'race war,' and 'I shall spare neither women nor children.' With men and boys he was even clearer: 'All will be shot.'

Ethnic extermination is almost never complete, however, partly because of the slippery nature of ethnicity, and partly because bodies consigned to death by the racist state have uses even when alive. While the majority of the Herero and Nama died, others ended up in the concentration camp on Shark Island, where they were subjected to 'scientific' experiments that often killed them. Their heads were then shipped to German universities for study and display. Some survivors were relatively

fortunate, managing to cross the desert to the relative safety of British-controlled territory.

The murder of the Herero and Nama has entered the history of modern genocide somewhat retrospectively: it has become common to see it as a precursor of the Holocaust, i.e., an earlier sign of the genocidal inclinations of the German state, and an experiment that produced lessons that would be put to a larger use in the 1940s. This reading is not incorrect, but it is nevertheless limited and misleading, because it gives the Namibian episode a pioneering status that disconnects it from the wider history of whiteness. The extermination of indigenous populations already had a long pedigree in settler colonialism, the indiscriminate murder of racially marked civilians was, likewise, a commonplace of colonial counterinsurgency, and concentration camps had already entered the lexicon of war and population-management in southern Africa. Rituals of mutilation and body-snatching had been part and parcel of the colonialism of 'pacification' and would remain so through the Vietnam War, and the scientific-exhibitionist allure of the bodies of the undead - established in southern Africa in the [Saartjie Baartman exhibitions](#) a century before the taking of Namibian heads - would continue through the Tuskegee experiments with syphilis.

The genocide of the Herero and Nama was, in that sense, an ordinary affair. It might be argued that its only pioneering feature was the level of control exercised by a centrally directed metropolitan state. Even that was, in some respects, a sign of weakness: German colonists in Southwest Africa were too few, and their colonial project too underdeveloped discursively and institutionally, to achieve without direct state intervention what Afrikaner and Anglo-identified settlers had achieved semi-autonomously (but rarely without the backing of troops) in South Africa, Australia and America. Bypassing militias and mobs, imperial Germany resorted immediately and

exclusively to the military to clear its colonial space. It was, one might say, more efficient. Also, in the sense that it established terror as both a ubiquitous administrative modality and a monopoly of the state, it was a closer ancestor of totalitarianism than other, more conventionally genocidal, settler colonial societies. Von Trotha's exercise in mass murder was thus radical as well as ordinary: generically white, but not disconnected from the specific atrocities of the post-1941 Third Reich.

When it comes to the remembrance of mass murder, however, the Namibian tribes and the victims of the Holocaust occupy very different historical niches. As a brown man, I winced at the sight of the Herero woman bringing the German tourists their dinner, visited involuntarily by the shadow of the radical within the ordinary. But I may not have recoiled similarly from the sight of Germans being served by a Jewish woman in a New York restaurant, even if the ethnic identities were reliably evident to all parties. Since 1945, Germans, Jews and 'the West' have had a conversation about the Holocaust in particular, about anti-Semitism generally, and even more generally about civilized codes of racism and murder. This conversation has become a foundation of a revised West. The new West is signified not only by a penitent and anti-militarist German nationhood, and an elaborate culture of European introspection, acknowledgment and apology epitomized in a vast body of literature, art, scholarship, memorial infrastructure, common sense, and language itself, but also policies of reparation and compensation. Most importantly, it is marked by a consensus about the reality of 'Judeo-Christian civilization,' which has become the publicly admissible code for 'whiteness.' In other words, the hypothetical encounter between the waitress and the tourist in New York is structured around a profound historical reckoning, and a major revision of the boundaries of identity on the part of the genocidal community: an erstwhile Other is now normatively part of the Self. This accommodation is the most fundamental reparation for the Holocaust. The waitress and the tourist are both aware of it, as is an eavesdropping 'third party,' who knows better than to be disturbed by an encounter of insiders.

In the case of the Herero and Nama, none of that reckoning and revision has occurred. The post-Holocaust German state belatedly acknowledged the genocide, issued an apology and returned the severed heads, but it was a diplomatic gesture, unattached either to reparations or to a wider culture of acknowledgment and self-transformation. While it is possible that individual Germans 'know about' von Trotha's exploits, that knowledge is not backed up by a repertoire of films, novels and essays that constitutes national culture, let alone civilization. There is no Günter Grass or Heinrich Böll of the Herero genocide. Namibia was done somewhere else, by people who can be disavowed as belonging to a different time and hence a different nation, and to people who are ultimately of limited relevance to being German or European. Even Hannah Arendt, the most brilliant philosopher of 'western civilization' after the Holocaust, and who famously made the connection between colonialism in Africa and totalitarianism in Europe, took no notice: there is hardly a word about Namibia in *The Origins of Totalitarianism*. Arendt's silence was entirely consistent with the limits of her critique of racism and fascism: post-war Europe - which remained the locus of a salvaged liberalism - could include within its civilizational ambit some, but not all, of its victims. Thus, even in the most generous circumstances, there could be sympathy but not identification. It might be argued, further, that Arendt's eagerness to situate the roots of totalitarianism in South Africa and Rhodesia rather than Namibia was compatible with the post-war German embrace of a dispersed European collective, making it easier for Germans to relegate certain episodes from the national past to a slippery, transnational legacy. The weakening of nationalism, ironically, also weakened the ethical imperative of ownership.

There was, consequently, no imperative to remember Namibia. Nor was there a discursive product like 'Never again,' which is ambiguous to begin with: it can mean either 'never again to us,' or 'never again to anybody,' and the two meanings

undergird very different types of memory-politics. Europe - which, like whiteness in general, retains its nationally-identified kernels but also loses them forgetfully in the vagueness of a fragmented past - has, after all, been remarkably efficient at forgetting colonialism, not in the sense that it does not acknowledge it, but in that it can be dealt with dishonestly and desultorily, or, all too often, with nostalgia and narcissism. The British East India Company's famine of 1770 may have killed ten million people, and the 1943 redux another four million, but these catastrophes have left no imprint upon either 'western civilization' or 'Britishness.' Located entirely outside Europe, colonial crimes require no adjustments of identity or boundary. Germans in Namibia can thus segue effortlessly from seeing the Herero as colonial vermin to seeing them as servers in exotic tourist space - a maneuver that is not possible with Jews or Russians (although it may be possible with the Roma and Sinti).

The connections between memory and responsibility are quite different when it comes to Namibians themselves. The Herero waitress knew about the mass killings, but only in very general terms. She gave no indication that the knowledge informed her identity - especially her sense of her political responsibility - in the way that awareness of the Holocaust is a part of Jewishness. In the museums of Windhoek, we find some memorialization of the events of 1904-1907, but once again, it is quite different from the European - or the aboriginal - template of remembering mass murder, in which genocide itself is a privileged category, producing ethnicity and undergirding the justification for either statehood or a particular claim upon the state. It is tempting to read that difference as a form of underdevelopment: as the failure of Namibians (and not just waitresses) to fully grasp the power of the discourse of genocide and its associated modes of self-representation. That grasp, however, is enabled by particular political configurations: the state acting in the name of the remorseful but secure killer, the victim claiming reparation, or the outsider-turned-insider.

All of those configurations are visible in the (highly contested) importance that memorializing genocide has taken on in settler-colonial societies since the 1960s, where indigenous people have found in the memory not only the symbols of their present-day political marginality, but the substance of community. (American Indians and Australian Aborigines are the most obvious examples.) It must be kept in mind, however, that 'native,' 'indigenous' and 'aboriginal' are not automatically interchangeable terms. The latter two acquire meaning primarily in the context of settler colonialism accompanied by the near-eradication of a particular 'native' category, the residue of which becomes 'aboriginal,' defined against the numerical, political and cultural dominance of the settler-ethnicity. In Namibia, neither the Herero nor the Nama - whose populations have rebounded - are aborigines. The Nama in particular, with their origins in the Dutch, San and Malay racial stew of the Cape region, are a relatively new ethnicity. They are, on the one hand, members of a large indigenous majority that is in control of the state. On the other hand, they are minorities within the indigenous population. They are politically weaker than a relatively large 'tribe' like the Ovambo (who dominated the organized struggle against South African rule and have a greater presence in the political establishment), but they are not subject to the discourse of imminent eradication that marks the aboriginal condition, relative to either blacks or whites. The roughly seven percent of the population that is white/settler includes German-speakers, but Afrikaans-speakers predominate, and its visible roots are in the long occupation of the country by the white-supremacist South African regime that displaced the Germans in 1915. They do not, as such, represent the genocidal element. They are better educated and wealthier than most Namibians, but the political reins and considerable wealth lie in the hands of a new, post-occupation black elite. The settlers, in other words, are not powerful enough to produce aboriginality among the indigenous. They were not powerful enough in 1904 either; it took the military resources of the German state to produce, through genocide, a temporary aboriginality in the Herero and Nama.

The sites in Windhoek that memorialize the violence of Namibia's colonial past are the Independence Memorial Museum (known to local guides as 'the coffee maker,' due to its odd architecture), and Heroes' Acre, the sprawling complex to the south of the city. At each place, and the former in particular, the genocide of 1904-07 is absorbed into standard narratives and iconographies of wars of national liberation, i.e., rendered not as victimhood but as heroism. At the Independence Memorial Museum, images of German soldiers and the victims of von Trotha's 'extermination order' are situated amidst Soviet rocket launchers and South African armored vehicles from the liberation war of the 1980s, and old photographs of hanged Herero are placed near new friezes that depict a tormented but defiant Namibian nation. Sam Nujoma, the SWAPO leader who became the first president of independent Namibia (and whose statue stands Moses-like on the steps of the museum), is highlighted as the direct legatee of Herero chief Hosea Kutako (after whom Windhoek's airport is named), and also as a friend and partner of Castro and Mandela. At Heroes' Acre, the trajectory is even less subtle: at the top of a hill studded with the names of dead nationalists and allies, we find a frieze in which colonial mass murder is only the starting point in an increasingly mechanized and triumphant struggle. There is, throughout, an absence of the sentimentality that marks the iconography of individual suffering, such as Steven Spielberg's notorious girl-in-the-red-coat. There is no appeal to the psychologized personhood that is a hallmark of the modern West, and that, in its genocide-remembering manifestation, undergirds a subjectivity (and indeed, ethnicity) defined by trauma and entitled to various kinds of 'post-traumatic' political conduct. There is, instead, a tendency to lapse into the crude rhetoric of national glory that marks the self-representation of a 'Third World country': the over-investment of identity in the state to compensate for the weakness of civil society, and a parallel investment in the most powerful instruments of violence available in the present to compensate for the weaknesses and humiliations perceived in the past. (It is fitting, although ironic, that a giant Iron Cross sits at the base of Heroes' Acre.) Emphasizing genocide without the surrounding images of fighters and clenched fists would be to underline that

weakness: the sense of shame that many Jews felt about 'being led to the slaughter,' which tightened their embrace of a state.

The memorialization of genocide in Namibia is thus somewhat crowded, i.e., without a privileged space of its own. It has lacked a constituency that might create that space, because the Herero and Nama have been neither the dominant groups within Namibian nationalism, nor existentially marginal within that nation. In a relatively poor society, the development of space in which the past is remembered is necessarily dependent upon state patronage. For the Namibian state that has inherited a history of genocide, memory-making has been eclipsed by other agendas, including especially the need to 'nation-build' across tribal identities, within which focusing on the victimhood of particular tribes would not only threaten the narrative of national unity, but also challenge the unacknowledged hierarchies within that nationhood. This is not necessarily a failure, any more than absence of Indian memorials to the dead of 1770 should be a matter of regret. The urge to remember 'what they did to us' is a second-rate sentiment (one that is literally sentimental) compared to the imperative of recalling what 'we' have done or are capable of doing to 'others.' Indeed, there is something salutary about the 'low-key' way in which Namibian nationalism has structured the memory of genocide, using it as a historical bridge to other victims and adversaries of colonialism, rather than a fetish of exceptional victimhood that calls for exceptional measures in the pursuit of reparation or deterrence (which is essentially the marriage of ethno-nationalist 'Never again' discourse with state power). As a source of justice, memorializing genocide is more necessary for the murderers than for the murdered. The rest is therapy.

Below:

Friezes at Heroes' Acre, The Iron Cross at Heroes' Acre, the Coffee Machine, Sam Nujoma on the steps of the National Independence Museum.









January 3, 2018

Posted by [Satadru Sen](#) at [10:32 AM](#) [Links to this post](#)

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Me too



In 2012, after Jyoti Singh Pandey was savagely raped and murdered on [a Delhi bus](#), thousands of middle-class men and women took to the streets to protest the so-called ‘rape culture’ of the Indian capital, the failure of the government to provide adequate security to the city’s women, and the reluctance of the state to sentence rapists to death. Quite a few observers, mostly leftists, pointed out that the citizens braving the batons and water cannons of the Delhi Police had not cared enough even to write an angry letter when poor women were raped by employers, tribal women were raped by the police, or Dalits were raped by upper-caste landlords. They had been less than outraged when Muslims in Gujarat were raped by Hindu nationalists, and they generally refused to believe that Kashmiri and Manipuri women could have been raped by the Army and the CRPF. The protesters, it was pointed out, were not only insisting that they were the primary victims of sexual violence in India, they were appropriating the unspeakable horror that the woman on the bus had experienced. It was a reasonable observation. Ironically, the same critics of middle-class self-absorption have jumped on board the ‘Me Too’ bandwagon, which is a similar exercise in self-absorption and conspicuous outrage, this time by the denizens of the global First World, which includes the aspirational First Worlds within the Third.

‘Me Too,’ which began with actresses accusing a movie producer of harassment and assault, has become a wider phenomenon. It remains, however, limited to middle and upper class women who have come forward to speak of their trauma. As with any declaration of victimhood by the privileged and the determination of the comfortable to weep for their moments of discomfort, this is both aesthetically and ideologically suspect. The ‘Me Too’ class of Americans, for instance, has shown no comparable outrage when it comes to refugees and migrants raped beyond the borders of America, or even those raped by American troops. Few who are flooding social media with their ‘confessions’ have given such eager support to Black Lives Matter, concerned themselves with the bombing of civilians in Afghanistan or Syria, or mobilized against the general violence of inequality. Yet the thought of white actresses being accosted by famous men in expensive hotel rooms was apparently enough to remind them of their own suffering, producing a rush of solidarity. This is not just a matter of selective empathy. Like the refusal of Indian protesters to ‘see’ rape in Kashmir and their conviction that sexual violence was *their* problem, the selectivity of ‘Me Too’ is a protection of one’s own complicity in the violence that is not protested.

Within the circle of elite protest, the need to declare ‘me too’ has produced strange confections and contrivances. On the one hand, it has cobbled together - under a hashtag - revelations of child molestation and rape with narratives of ‘inappropriate’ conduct and innuendo, justifying the eclecticism with vague references to ‘the patriarchy’ and an absurdly simplistic notion of ‘power’ that eviscerates adulthood and consent. On the other, it has borrowed the vocabulary of law enforcement, criminal justice (‘repeat sexual offender,’ ‘zero tolerance,’ etc.) and tabloid media (a world of ‘predators’) and merged it with the language of campus bureaucracy (the domain of the ‘inappropriate’), effectively stretching the boundaries of rape to the point where it is defined entirely by how the victim claims to ‘feel,’ and covers everything from extreme force to bad jokes and bad sex. Elie Wiesel is accused of an

'assault' (an unwanted ass-grab lasting a second) at a public function: his victim claims the incident (which she [describes](#) in lurid terms, using words like 'inserted,' 'molested' and 'shoved') left her with eighteen years of suicidal depression and panic attacks. She is not otherwise bothered by Wiesel's [politics](#); her trauma stems partly from her belief that he is a great humanitarian. An actress has stepped forward to accuse the octogenarian George H.W. Bush of 'sexual assault' because he supposedly reached out of his wheelchair to pat her posterior and tell her a dirty joke. An article in the [New York Times](#) described Donald Trump's dismissal of Megyn Kelly during the 2016 election campaign (she was, he had said, menstruating when she asked him difficult questions) as a 'horrific sexual violation.' Trump's remark was certainly horrific in its coarseness and its sexism, but can it really be called sexual violation? And is Kelly's experience with Trump's oafishness automatically horrific? This is not just a debasement of language that inflates the significance of some violations and deflates that of others. It is the deployment of language to appropriate the pain of others to amplify one's own discomfort.

'Me Too' exemplifies, also, the confessional culture that is the hallmark of the Internet age, and that has been embraced as feminist 'self-expression.' Women, it is assumed, not only may but should 'confess' their experiences - particularly sexual experiences, good and bad - publicly and heroically, as part of the recovery of the female voice that would otherwise be silenced by 'power.' Parts of the formulation are quite misleading. 'Confession' is a morally meaningful idea only if the confessing individual is going to admit a crime or sin, which is clearly not the case here. What is being invested with the heroic value of confession is actually exhibition: the narcissistic glow of revealing yourself to admirers and sympathizers in relative safety, like conspicuously carrying a mattress around campus as protest *and* as an 'art project,' expecting a grade at the end of the semester. Such exhibition reflects the cult of psychiatric selfhood that has become a middle-class entitlement. It is deeply reactionary, fed by decades of corporate incitement to self-love as self-expression,

and now by the culture of the selfie shared on social media. The choice of 'me too' as the hashtag of this herd behavior is entirely apt.

In the process of that 'heroic' self-expression, accusation itself is enveloped in a halo of saintly suffering and 'courage' that apparently eliminates the need for skepticism, due process (including the presumption of innocence) and evidence. To accuse is to warrant protection, love and solidarity; to be accused is to be damned. This has generated a proliferation of irresponsible, damaging and malicious finger-pointing: mischief masquerading as justice, the confusion of empathy and 'belief' to the degree that the need to believe accusers has taken precedence over the concept of reasonable doubt, the substitution of 'feelings' for legality, and demands for 'zero tolerance,' the one-size-fits-all reaction to public anxiety beloved of administrators and politicians seeking to show their toughness. On campuses, it has generated the oddly sentimental kangaroo courts of Title IX, which are a [travesty of due process](#) and ludicrous enough that Laura Kipnis was subjected to Title IX proceedings for having criticized Title IX proceedings. Some 'Me Too' supporters have opined that since due process has 'not worked' as a deterrent to sexual violations, it is dispensable. By that logic, the failure of the criminal courts to prevent murder and theft should give us the license to lynch. Revisiting due process is entirely counterproductive if it means the enhancement of "victims' rights," a pedigreed right-wing ideology.

Those who are less comfortable with lynching have hedged by pointing to the urgency of systemic change. There is no doubt that systemic change is a good idea, just as there is no doubt that unsolicited pussy-grabbing is an especially repulsive masculine entitlement. But to jump from that to jettisoning all sense of proportion, wallowing in one's conviction of victimhood, and celebrating or defending the circulation of lists of 'sexual harassers' - alternately described as 'sex offenders' or 'sexual assailants,'

named by anonymous accusers, compiled without question or corroboration - is to accept the doctrine of collateral damage, which makes (other) individuals expendable if one's (own) cause appears worthy. It may be argued that scholars who have spent their careers celebrating *hools*, jacqueries and 'political society' should expect nothing more liberal than a well-intentioned mob trial. But it is a dangerous road for a movement to take, no matter what its bona fides. Few allies will remain when the fingers of accusation are so random and reckless.

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The Crisis of the Indian World



The relationship between cosmopolitanism and nationalism is, generally speaking, not mutually sympathetic. Nationalists tend to regard cosmopolitans with suspicion, and cosmopolitans look upon nationalists with alarm and condescension. The two ways of constructing the Self are, of course, not mutual incompatible either. Kwame Appiah suggested that an ethically meaningful cosmopolitanism necessarily begins with strong affiliation with a specific community. Certainly, cosmopolitan nationalism can be imagined in at least two different ways: a nationhood that is internally cosmopolitan, and one that engages actively with a community of nations. I want to talk about how these two possibilities have come together, and come apart, in modern India. I want to suggest that the limits of internal cosmopolitanism in India - most specifically, a sweeping delegitimization of the concept of national minorities - have set up the limits of being Indian in the world, and that these limits are particularly evident in the present historical moment.

I want to begin on the margin of India, with 'Muslim Zion,' as Faisal Devji called Pakistan. I do not need to go into details of Devji's thesis now, except to point out that such 'Zionism' - Muslim or Jewish - rested upon a willingness to think of nationhood outside majorities, well before it reached the point of imagining a new state with a new majority. Even when such a state emerged on the horizon, it remained connected to communities that were, apparently, within the nation but without the state. It can be argued that the failure of the first phase of Pakistan in 1971 reflected the pitfalls of this kind of cosmopolitan nationhood: whereas the patriots of the West Wing remained over-attached to a Muslim identity that transcended the nation-state, and failed to cultivate an affiliation with their subcontinental fellow-citizens, those of the East Wing possessed and cultivated the more conventional, compact nationalism in which ties beyond the territorial state are not relevant to your identity, and being the majority counts for something.

The Iqbalian nationalism of the West Wing had relevance beyond the 'nation' of Indian Muslims. Here again Faisal Devji has been an illuminative historian, arguing that for Gandhi in South Africa and even afterwards, nationalist politics was about negotiation between groups dispersed over a wide geography that could be imperial or Indian, but in either case was unconcerned with majorities and borders. Devji implies that this cosmopolitanism is precisely why Gandhi fell afoul of Savarkar, Godse and their ilk, and Godse himself was quite explicit about it. The refusal to grant an absolute value to the majority concept, as much as any quixotic attachment to non-violence, made Gandhi a misfit and a traitor in the new nation.

Gandhi was especially dangerous because he was *not* such an outlier in the last decades of colonial rule. There was, of course, Rabindranath Tagore, whose universalist humanism could be at odds with the politics of organized nationalism, and who notoriously wrote, 'That what you call a patriot, I am not.' The words and the posture are easy to misconstrue, and indeed, they have been misconstrued. Far from disavowing national identity, Rabindranath was articulating a way of being Indian in the world, and more generally, of being a nationally-identified subject in the world. What he was rejecting was the primacy of allegiance to a single state and its defining majority.

That rejection could be the foundation of moral responsibility for people anywhere in the world, as it was for Rabindranath. But it could also be the basis for establishing a relationship with people who were of the nation but not of the state, and here, it was relevant to nationalists who have actually been located on the right wing of Indian politics and intellectual history. The sociologist Benoy Kumar Sarkar, for instance, was not a bleeding-heart lover of all people. Between the world wars, he spent much of his time in Germany and Italy, and became a little too fond of the governing strategies

he saw here. He wrote voluminously about the Indian relationship with the world in the past, present and future, and was an unsentimental ‘hard’ nationalist, who imagined sovereignty in terms of state power.

Yet Sarkar did not get along well with the mainstream of the Indian National Congress, who in the late 1930s and 1940s were on the verge of inheriting the Indian state. They saw him as an unreliable nationalist. The reason was Sarkar’s evident indifference to the Congress’ goal of a single, unified Indian state. What matters, he wrote, was independence; it mattered less whether there was one independent Indian state, or several. Also, he seemed to care nothing for majorities and their natural privileges: the vanguard of modernity, for Sarkar, was necessarily a minority. There was, of course, a particular context for Sarkar’s remarks, and that was the demand for Pakistan. We should keep in mind that Pakistan was not the only ‘secessionist’ proposal on the table: there were also demands from various princes that their states remain outside the control of a centralized Indian government. In that context, Sarkar’s willingness to accept multiple independent states was, from the Congress perspective, close to treason.

Treason, however, is a complicated thing. Sarkar’s openness to multiple Indias was similar to Jinnah’s, which is all the more reason to revisit the cosmopolitanism of ‘Muslim Zion.’ Muslim ‘separatism’ in India was not merely, or even primarily, a matter of being enchanted by a globally dispersed minority-nation. For Jinnah and arguably many others, the enchantment, so to speak, was with an Indian minority-nation, whose dispersal was a political problem that could not be solved within a unified state in the time available. That vision of cosmopolitan nationhood as a political problem, and a limited timeline for a solution, was explicit in Sarkar. To wait indefinitely for a nationhood that could be politically organized into a single state, he

suggested, was to prolong colonial rule. It is possible to read this attitude as stemming from an internationalism that was not oriented towards the sovereign nation-state, as Manu Goswami has done. I think, however, that such a reading is incorrect. Sarkar remained, to his core and to his death in 1948, an ideologue of the sovereign state, and specifically an Indian state, maneuvering in a world of sovereign states. But the contours of that state were negotiable.

So were the contours of the nationalized Self, up to a point. Multi-state adjustments were simultaneously a dispersal and a shrinking of the Self, coupled with a partial relinquishing of claims upon the part amputated. The Bengalis of eastern Bengal must now accept that they are foreigners, Sarkar wrote in 1948, thinking specifically of Pakistan's Hindu minority, not Muslims. He did not claim special privileges for Indian Hindus, laid no claim upon a Hindu diaspora on behalf of an Indian state, conceded that many erstwhile compatriots would be foreigners to the specific state that would henceforth be known as India, but implied also that foreigner did not necessarily mean alien. There could, in other words, be overlapping Indian subjectivities, which were both rooted (in specific states) and dispersed (across borders).

Sarkar would be strictly loyal to only one India, but remain cognizant of his kinship with the others. Likewise, when Jinnah insisted that there was no such thing as an Indian nation, he was not saying that he saw Hindus as aliens. He was articulating the difficulty of reconciling peoplehood with statehood. Multiple centers of sovereignty produced new possibilities, not only in the form of federalism *within* the state, but also as a trans-state federalism, or a multiplication of sovereignty. For Sarkar, as for Jinnah, the adjusted, compact Self was both affiliated with one particular state, and linked to a nationally identifiable region, in the process of being located in the world.

Jinnah and Sarkar were able to ‘problem-solve’ in these terms because they occupied an intersectional moment, when multiple, overlapping ways of imagining the nationalized self could be brought to bear upon emerging states and citizenships. The Republic of India had not yet acquired its monopoly on Indianness. We might recall that in 1947, Sarat Bose and Shaheed Suhrawardy, men with very different political allegiances, could join forces in suggesting that Bengal remain united and external to both India and Pakistan. Sarat Bose, certainly, was not disavowing his Indianness. But he and Suhrawardy were Bengali patriots at a moment when that identity could be governmentally expressed outside an Indian nation state, or a Pakistani state for that matter, without nullifying either their conviction that nation-states were key instruments of dignity and sovereignty, or their investment in a capacious sovereignty that accommodated many kinds of Indian subjectivities.

The degree to which the Indian National Congress shared in these cosmopolitan possibilities is a vexed question, not least because the Congress had many ideological factions. Even if we were to look at the overtly cosmopolitan Nehru, there is no easy answer. We can certainly hold Nehru responsible for pushing so hard for a centralized, unitary state that alternative formulations of sovereignty were nipped in the bud. When he wrecked the Cabinet Mission Plan, for instance, he aborted not only the last chance to avert the Partition, but also what would have been, in some ways, a binational state. It has been suggested by Ayesha Jalal that Nehru and the Congress deliberately expelled ‘Muslim India’ from ‘India,’ in order to bypass the political challenges of governing a binational state. Unlike Sarkar, they restricted Indianness to the rump state for which they settled, effectively partitioning not just a state, but an identity. It can be argued, therefore, that Nehru gave us a curtailed Indianness.

That model of Indianness, however, was also a way of being engaged in the world, not just as a sovereign power (as Sarkar wanted) but as an instrument of justice. It was that cosmopolitanism of justice, an extension of the Nehru-and-Ambedkar-driven nationhood of justice, that caused India to take on quixotic positions like the boycott of apartheid South Africa, to support the Palestinians, and to criticize the Western wars in Suez and Vietnam.

We can also say that Nehru's government presided over a formative important stage of Indian federalism, which made it possible for a federal identity and administrations to coexist with their provincial counterparts. The connections between this internal federalism and internationalism in foreign policy are not immediately obvious, but they are real. We know that Nehru initially resisted linguistic federalism; it was, to some extent, forced upon him. But he - and more importantly, large numbers of his compatriots - came to accept the arrangement as a reasonable solution to the problem of 'unity in diversity.' While it may very well have complicated the project of 'national unity' and made secessionist agendas easier to formulate, it was also visibly a countermeasure against a monolithic nationhood premised on, say, the dominance of Hindus or Hindi-speakers. Nehruvian India had a Hindu majority and a legitimate Muslim minority (whose legitimacy was bemoaned by some as 'appeasement'); it was, simultaneously, a nation in which all ethnic groups - even Hindi-speakers - were minorities. It was, in that sense, a citizenship of accommodation and mutual engagement: a big-tent nationhood, oriented towards a big-tent world.

If we compare that Indianness with the subjectivity of Hindutva or the Hindu right, there are some obvious overlaps. Savarkar, who coined the term Hindutva, was a Maharashtrian nationalist *and* an Indian nationalist who wanted a Bengali sister-in-law. He was representative of an Indianizing agenda within the Hindu right that was

impatient with narrow or provincial identity-projects, seeking to complement them with something that was new and pan-Indian, and that could be articulated in terms of national culture or even race, as in M.S. Golwalkar's writings.

Those new structures, however, were often quite coercive, in that they relied upon the state to steamroller political opposition. They were also narrow, being upper-caste, north-Indian, Hindu, and Hindi-speaking, even when articulated by Maharashtrians or Bengalis. To use a couple of American metaphors, if federated Indianness was a salad-bowl, the Indianness of Hindutva was a melting-pot in which the final product had been preordained. Moreover, as the RSS and VHP became the principal institutions for setting the agenda of Hindutva, the nature of the preordination moved sharply away from the relatively secular Hindu nationalism of Savarkar, towards a Hindu nationhood that was nakedly concerned with religion and mythology.

The nationhood of Hindutva has its vision of the world, but it is a different world - different not only from the worlds of Sarkar, Gandhi and Jinnah, but also from that of Nehru. It saw no world at all beyond India. Ironically, this India was not the truncated India of Nehru, but the India-as-neighborhood of Sarkar and Jinnah, nostalgically and aggressively reimagined as Akhand Bharat. Whereas Sarkar and Jinnah had been willing to entertain a pragmatic disaggregation, Hindutva fantasized about reaggregation of territorial sovereignty, although not of people. But beyond the reaggregated neighborhood, lay a void of knowledge and imagination, akin to the horizon at the edge of the flat earth. When Indians were forced by circumstances to engage that world, it filled with monsters of the local imagination, like Stephen Greenblatt's New World. Engaging 'realistically' with that horizon, either in terms of justice or in terms of realpolitik, was unimportant. It was, essentially, a modern

peasant's view of the world, stopping at the edge of the neighborhood: a small world, not much bigger than a small nation.

To illustrate how his shift in Indian cosmopolitanism has played out, I want to compare, very briefly, the Indian responses to two crises: the Bangladesh crisis of 1971, and the Myanmar crisis of the present time. To recapitulate very quickly, in 1971, India took in around ten million Bengali refugees, remained clear that they would have to go back to their territory, began to intervene in the civil war in Pakistan on the side of the Bengalis, engaged in a complicated diplomacy involving the US, the Soviet Union, China, and the UN, and eventually went to war. Mrs. Indira Gandhi's government did these things for a number of reasons, some of which can be called unsentimental and others humanitarian, but in either case, they have to do with a particular notion of cosmopolitan Indianness. They involved, for instance, a sophisticated understanding of a world of nation-states, whose postures and possibilities were shaped by history and politics. They involved a sensitivity to Indian federalism, in which Bangladeshi refugees generated sympathy in West Bengal and resentment in other border states. They involved the recognition that Bangladeshis - or Pakistanis, for that matter - were not Indians who could simply stay on (even when they were Hindus, which the majority of the refugees were). But they were not aliens either, and Indians were linked to them by ties of history and affect, and by political and moral responsibilities that could not be encapsulated within the sovereignty of any single state. The Indian calculus involved, thus, a particular understanding of the location of the self in the nation, the nation in the state, the state in the neighborhood, and the neighborhood in the world.

In the current situation involving the ethnic cleansing of the Rohingya from Myanmar, the Indian position has been (i) to give almost unqualified support to the Myanmar

regime, which is conducting the ethnic cleansing, (ii) to categorize the Rohingya as a threat to Indian 'national security,' and (iv) to not only refuse to take in Rohingya refugees, but to deport the ones already in India. In the process, the current Indian government has not only shown itself to be on the wrong side of a humanitarian crisis, it has also seriously damaged its relations with Bangladesh, which is bearing the brunt of the exodus from Myanmar without diplomatic support from the largest, most powerful state in South Asia.

The Indian position can be hard to understand, in the sense that it is a departure from older patterns of policy, and in that the 'national security' argument is absurd. (Arguably, there would be a greater threat to Indian security if the Rohingya became another permanently stateless and homeless people.) But the position does have a logic of its own: there is an expectation that supporting the Myanmar junta will balance Chinese influence, there are the oil fields that the Reliance corporation has acquired in Myanmar, there is fear of Muslims, there is contempt for Bangladesh. 'Bangladeshi' has long been the Hindu right's synonym for 'illegal immigrant' and 'undesirable alien.' Even among many Indians who can agree that the Rohingya are being ill-treated by the Myanmar regime, there is a feeling that it is not an Indian problem, and that the Indian state has no obligations in the matter.

But what there is, more than anything else, is that warped new way of thinking about the self, the nation, the state, the neighborhood and the world. Not only is there none of the worldliness, i.e., the solidarity with the alien, that was the hallmark of Nehruvian cosmopolitanism, there is no sense of kinship or empathy with a Bengali-speaking people, including Hindus as well as Muslims, in the immediate neighborhood of India. Indianness has receded further within the neighborhood: there is no sense of responsibility that comes from a historical bond with Bangladesh, i.e., that sense of

Bangladesh as another India. There is none of the regret and responsibility that animated people of the Partition generation, from Manto to Ritwik Ghatak, who remained cognizant that the borders of the new nation-states were ethnically untrue, and who continued to recognize themselves on the other side of the line. Indianness has, in fact, been diminished even within the Indian state, where questions of whether being a Bengali-speaker makes you at least contextually a Bengali, and whether being Bengali gives you a claim on India, have been swept aside by the all-powerful claim of citizenship. Whereas the apparent Bengaliness of the Rohingya has gained them a measure of sympathy in Bangladesh, provincial and parochial identities (as legitimate political claims upon the whole) have lost ground in India. There is now only a national majority. To be a minority is to be anti-national. This investment in a majority responsible only for itself is reinforced by the post-1991, neoliberal cult of the individual living in a gated community, stepping and sometimes driving over the homeless.

Where a wide spectrum of ideologues once saw a natural multiplicity of identities, responsibilities and centers of affiliation, there is now an Indianness of exclusiveness, that excludes from empathy, fellow-feeling and responsibility all those who cannot be captured within the shrunken boundaries of the majority, the state and the self. I want to close with two observations. One is that this shrinking is an abdicating of liberalism, and democracy without liberalism is inherently fascist. The failure of Indian cosmopolitanism is thus a part of a graver crisis of Indian society, with its majoritarianism and mob violence. The political consolidation of a national majority - pushed to the point of majoritarian nationalism - has, ironically, not only diminished the Indian ability to act in the world, it has precipitated a moral leprosy that can only be demoralizing to those who value an ethical society. The other is that this is not a peculiarly Indian problem. It may be acute in India, where liberalism has historically had shallow roots. But we see it also in Brexit and in Trump's America. It forces us to face the inherent tension between nationalism and liberalism in the best of

circumstances, and the reality that whereas nationalism finds its fulfillment in the mobilized majority, liberalism (especially in the nation-state) is always a minority ideology. Cosmopolitan nationhood is the resolution of that tension, but it is also, much of the time, a contradiction in terms.

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Public history and India



An examination of ‘public history’ in India - or rather, public history *and* India - has taken on a special urgency in recent years, not least because the Republic of India is in the middle of an unprecedented crisis of the relationship between the state, the public and the citizen. In this situation, it has become necessary to scrutinize not only Indian publics and their histories, but also the public’s uses of history, and the

problems and possibilities of writing history for the public. At the core of the crisis is a breakdown of the alliance between liberalism and history without which the democratic nation-state becomes ethnocentric and, in some contexts, fascist. This breakdown has become inescapable in India, where a rampant and frequently violent majoritarianism - unchecked by the state, and increasingly inseparable from the state - has been feeding off, and feeding, narratives of bridges to Lanka, the pre-Mughal origins of the Taj Mahal, and alternative outcomes of the Battle of Haldighati. The problem cannot be pinned on any particular government; it is woven into the fabric of a public that has, by and large, fetishized sovereignty without liberalism since the inception of the Indian nation.

History, in this situation, is both the disease and the remedy, because the weakness of liberal institutions and principles of governance in India is compounded by readily identifiable political and discursive fallacies, such as allegation of 'pseudo-secularism' and the discourse of 'Muslim appeasement.' These fallacies are undergirded by a narrative of indigenes and invaders, tyrants and victims, that is not only reactionary in the context of a multi-ethnic society, but that has not been challenged consistently by liberal nationalists. In the late nineteenth century, for instance, the Congress Moderates and their Extremist challengers generally agreed that Aurangzeb was the devil. They differed mainly in what they wished to emphasize: whereas one historically-minded group dwelled on the diabolical, the other preferred to divert attention to the available angels (Akbar, Dara Shukoh, even benign Europeans).

In subsequent decades, when the Extremist/Moderate divide had become obsolete, two broad factions continued to mark nationalist politics, both overflowing the conventional boundary between the 'secular' and the 'communal.' One group saw the public project of the nation-state as historical revenge, the other emphasized the reconciliation of old enmities in a newly shared citizenship. They did not, however, disagree fundamentally about the content of the past, or about a dichotomy of options in the present between vengeance and forgetting. Since history tends to work against forgetting, it is not surprising that a nation founded on a history of conflict with a resident enemy has become more focused on vengeance, and more overtly majoritarian, as it has become more democratic. Also, since the illiberal state has typically functioned as the gatekeeper to public forums such as museums, archaeological sites, the cinema, and above all the school, the liberal historian -

where she has existed - has had a limited and fiercely contested access to the public, especially that part of the public that has constituted itself as the 'majority.'

What is public history, and can it mean the same thing in all contexts? Acknowledging that the concept of public history is notoriously hard to define, Robert Weible nevertheless suggested that it involves an attempt by scholars to bridge the gaps between academic and popular uses of historical discourse. He gave as his example the engagement of historians in the provision of texts that might accompany monuments and exhibits, those being sites where the public performs its public function. Such a conceptualization may be appropriate in the democratic states of the West, where even in the midst of intense disagreement about what history should inform public policy, there is a consensus of sorts about what history is, about what 'the public' is, about the public's investment in history, and about the public's claim upon the state, i.e., about the connections between public and policy. It is not adequate in the case of India, where no such consensus is apparent. R.K. Laxman and Arvind Kejriwal notwithstanding, the Indian 'common man' is a fragmented and contentious animal, and one cannot take for granted a notion of citizenship that is anchored either in popular sovereignty or in liberalism, which have become politically opposed to each other in India. Here, multiple publics - sometimes including the same people - vie to establish not only the content of history, but the contours and significance of history as a discipline with a privileged place in the nation-state. Academic history in India is only precariously located in the public. Its narratives are challenged constantly and effectively by those who claim the prestige of history as a discipline but are uninterested in its methods and unaware of its content, and it has no ready response to the argument that disciplinary prestige can have no assurance of authority in a democracy. 'Sentiments' can be as important as history in determining policy.

Under the circumstances, the 'public history' of the historical space that now includes India, Pakistan and Bangladesh must be structured broadly and pursue multiple projects simultaneously. The structure should accommodate three main objectives: studying the formation of particular publics, studying public experiences, and writing for the public in a society at war with itself. These should be intertwined goals, but they can nevertheless be discrete enough to guide historians as they set out to define what they are trying to do.

We might begin with histories of becoming a public, or the processes and debates through which ‘people’ become a ‘public.’ These must contend with the layered nature of assertions of public identity in India since the early nineteenth century. Not only have specific politically mobilized identities (structured as ethnicity, nationality, class, caste, etc.) produced a multiplicity of publics, a new general identity (that of being a member of ‘the public’ as a concept equipped with entitlements and even obligations) has functioned as the glue holding these compartments together. The latter, however, is not universal, because while it is constructed with reference to global notions of being a public, it is also, invariably, limited by national citizenship. Exploring the tensions and resolutions between the particularity, generality, and universality of public-formation is critical to understanding the contextual and essentially federal practice of Indian nationhoods, in which there is a constant awareness of outsiders who are also insiders, and one learns to function in overlapping and not easily reconciled modes. These modes include the regional and the transregional, the Bengali and the Indian, the Baidya and the *bhadra*, the Indian and the modern. Each has its particular relationship to what can be either one state, carefully differentiated layers and segments of the state, or institutions below (or alongside) the state. In any case, the analysis must spotlight the development of a relationship with instituted authority. Without the relationship, which can be proprietorial or oppositional, there can be no public to speak of.

Such histories of becoming are also, necessarily, projects of distinguishing between private and public worlds, a task that includes the construction of the ‘private’ as an appropriate subject for public debate. Here, Partha Chatterjee indicated in *The Nation and its Fragments* and Dipesh Chakrabarty in *Provincializing Europe*, colonialism generated private and semi-private national domains that were fraught but also reassuringly conservative. It generated, in conjunction, a ferociously contested domain of public experiences, in which ‘private’ subjects locked out of the chambers of policy-making could not only articulate a public-hood grounded in the shared experience of powerlessness, but experience alternative modalities of power grounded in resistance or (more typically) indifference to formal authority, coupled with an intensely creative willingness to identify and defend alternative theaters of agency. These experiences are, indeed, key to our understanding of the public in a society that has, as often as not, bypassed civil society on the way to modernity, and in which civil society - where it exists - remains deeply ambivalent about liberalism. In

other words, close examination of 'being (in) public' as a set of experiences and projects of self-making is essential to the study of not only nationalism without a nation-state, but also the post-1947 South Asian predicament of illiberal democracy.

That predicament is precisely what creates, for the 'public historian,' a space and a responsibility to speak across publics, as it were. It is not enough to dissect the public, although that task remains essential. It is important, also, to acknowledge that what is being dissected is not dead, is unlikely to be killed by academic historians, and is something of a killer in its own right. Academic historians must speak to it, about it, and (at least strategically) from within it: recovering from the past the alternatives to a public project of existential revenge and placing them within the lived realities of the present. It is, therefore, essential to address what the public itself considers important to public life: institutions and experiences like working, dining, sport, school, the cinema, the shop, the street, and the war zone. If the everyday world of the public citizen - the experiences that generate difference from some and commonality with some others - can be unpacked and explained in terms that are comprehensible to those who are arguably modern but not liberal, we may be able to recover, from the mob, a critical mass of citizens who recognize that lynching is a specific, and inferior, form of public action.

August 22, 2017

Appeasements



As anyone who follows Indian public discourse is aware, the rhetoric of ‘Muslim appeasement’ is now ubiquitous. No longer limited to the rabid Hindu right, it has penetrated the language and perception of citizens who consider themselves secular and moderate, and who are, indeed, often opposed to the nakedly violent elements of the Sangh Parivar. These moderates nevertheless offer the word up as a reason, if not a justification, for the behavior of the rabid, conceding that the various phenomena of Hindutva in Indian political life were produced by the appeasement of minorities (specifically Muslims) by politicians (specifically the Congress and the Left parties). Effectively, then, they agree with a key plank of the Hindutva platform, and reflect its increasingly hegemonic presence in what constitutes common sense in both private and public life.

The word ‘appeasement’ has a wider history. Its popular usage began with British prime minister Neville Chamberlain’s attempt to postpone the Second World War by agreeing to Adolf Hitler’s demand for the Sudetenland in 1938. It soon became shorthand for a range of interconnected political faults: shortsightedness, cowardice, cynicism, betrayal. Its application in the Indian case has included all those implications. This is curious, because Chamberlain’s perceived mistake was to have appeased a foreign enemy. His appeasement was a foreign policy, rather than an ideological position. Appeasement in India, on the other hand, has been a discourse anchored in domestic politics and national ideology. It is more heavily loaded and pernicious than a handshake in Munich. The original implications of the accusation are very much present in India, but the line between foreign and domestic enemies has become blurred. Indeed, the rhetoric of appeasement is useful precisely because it blurs that line, continuously turning a portion of the Indian population into an alien entity and democratic politics into treason.

Objectively, the idea that minorities - and Muslims in particular - have been pampered by the Indian state is ludicrous. Muslims in India are, on average, considerably poorer than Hindus. Their presence in the institutions of government and public life does not remotely approach their percentage of the population, and they suffer from chronic discrimination in housing and employment. Harassment, intimidation and worse by the police, army and paramilitary forces is a fact of life. They are increasingly subject to the violence of vigilantes and lynch mobs that are either ignored or assisted by the state. They cannot complain about intolerance or criticize the Indian state - let alone the army and other sacred cows - without immediately provoking a firestorm of public outrage and being told to shut up or move to Pakistan. They are, moreover, subject to pervasive and unquantifiable abuse in what might be called personal interactions with the majority community. This abuse overflows into the public domain, saturating the press and online forums with vitriol about 'mullahs,' 'terrorists,' 'love jihad,' people who have too many babies, and the rape of disinterred corpses. If Indian Muslims have been appeased for seventy years, it has not accomplished very much.

If we look at the body of evidence that is held up to demonstrate appeasement, it quickly falls apart. Nobody can demonstrate how this appeasement has hurt the majority community, let alone been illegitimate. Indian Muslims can vote, it is pointed out defensively, as if this is some sort of extraordinary generosity in what is supposed to be a democratic republic. They are allowed to live in India, it is proclaimed in the same vein. Again, what generosity, 'allowing' people to live *and* vote in their own country! Indian democracy and pluralism are not charity to an undeserving minority; these are gifts that, in the words of the Constitution, the Indian people gave to themselves. Not only are these the substance of freedom and the justification of independence (because otherwise, what is independence for?), they are essential to multi-ethnic nationhood.

The Muslim Civil Code and Article 370 of the Constitution (which gives 'special status' to Jammu and Kashmir) are perennial targets of those who believe that appeasement is real. Such claims reflect a total obliviousness of the historical context of these policies. Article 370 came out of the extraordinary political, military and legal circumstances of Kashmir's accession to the Indian Union. Without it, the National Conference would not have given its assent to the annexation of the state, and without that assent, the Indian position would have been untenable. The Instrument

of Accession was not enough to ensure either legitimacy or order, and negotiators in Delhi and Srinagar understood that a measure of popular consent was needed that could be acquired only through political concessions. The 'special status' of Kashmir is not some inexplicable foolishness on Nehru's part; it is a hard-headed compromise based on recognition of the actual specialness of the political situation. Muslim personal law is a product of the aftermath of the Partition, when it was important for the Congress to demonstrate its commitment to the principle that India was neither Pakistan nor Jinnah's version of Hindustan, i.e., to ensure that the Indian state did not belong to any particular ethno-religious community. Moreover, given the horrendous violence that had just taken place, it was necessary to reassure the remaining Indian Muslims that they were safe in India, not just individually but as a community. That reassurance was essential to the stabilization of the fledgling state and its fragile institutions.

The Muslim Civil Code is quite rightly a contentious body of law. It authorizes the most reactionary elements of Indo-Muslim society to speak for the community, and consequently it infringes upon the rights of women as equal citizens of a democratic state. It can also be argued, albeit tenuously, that a nationally-organized society should have a uniform code of civil law. (Why? The assumption is reminiscent of the case for a national language that was abandoned in 1965.) In any case, the Indian Constitution unambiguously looks forward to a uniform civil code; religion-specific legality was originally intended to be a temporary arrangement. But while the activism of Muslims who want to abolish triple-talaq and reform unjust divorce laws is entirely admirable, the professed sympathy of Hindus must be viewed with great suspicion. Hindus can legitimately protest the plight of divorced Muslim women only when they give up their own habit of turning away Muslim renters, and are ready to welcome Muslim sons-in-law. Until then, they would do well to examine the reactionary elements within their own civil code (there is a considerable body of scholarship on this), to stop beating their wives and bullying daughters who make their own sexual choices, and to insist upon the recognition of marital rape as a criminal offense - none of which they are willing to do. They might also try to understand that the reform of Muslim personal law will become politically feasible - i.e., acceptable to those Muslims who are themselves ambivalent about it - only in an environment of security and tolerance, or in the absence of the naked hate that now runs casually through Indian society and its public discourse. A beleaguered minority will cling to the symbols of its identity even when those symbols are themselves oppressive. Not even majorities are exempt from this dynamic: it is worth noting that the 'reformed' Hindu civil code became possible only when colonial rule had ended.

Until then, the most repressive laws and customs were zealously protected as markers of national sovereignty, and even Vidyasagar found it necessary to oppose the Age of Consent Act of 1891, which outlawed sex with girls under the age of twelve.

For the appeasement-wallahs, there is also a constant accumulation of petty and local complaints: about municipal authorities telling Hindus to desist from playing music near mosques, state-subsidized Haj, government support for madrasas, Muslim criminals who are supposedly protected by politicians, and the tendency of non-Sanghi political parties to protect (occasionally) what are understood as 'Muslim interests.' They barely notice that Hindu pilgrimages are also subsidized by the state, Hindu criminals also receive the patronage of politicians, and that Hindus are louder and more effective than Muslims when it comes to demanding that the state protect their 'sentiments' from assorted insults. They forget that so-called 'vote-bank politics' - the articulation and protection of particular interests - is the normal stuff of democratic politics, and not the equivalent of giving in to a foreign enemy (unless Muslims themselves are imagined as aliens) or some peculiar 'pseudo-secular' vice. Do Hindus not form 'vote banks' when they organize themselves by caste, class and language? Democracy without vote banks would require a level of individuated citizenship that does not exist anywhere in the world, let alone India. These complaints are typically accompanied by outrage at the plight of the Kashmiri Pandits and religious minorities in Pakistan, the implication being not only that the ill-treatment of Muslims in India (and Kashmir) is a reasonable retribution, but also that Pakistan is the preferred model of the relationship between the individual, the community and the state. For them, democracy and politics - i.e., the need to work through constitutional means and make concessions at the negotiating table - are weaknesses. They would prefer that the Indian state simply bludgeon its way to produce the results desired by 'the majority,' even if that means killing, terrorizing, disenfranchising or expelling a hundred and fifty million people. Those options are still voiced mainly as wistful fantasies and in private conversations, but the overflow into the media and the street - slogans of 'Pakistan ya kabristan' ('to Pakistan or to the graveyard') - is already apparent.

'Appeasement' in the Indian context is thus a fundamentally anti-democratic discourse in more ways than one. It equates the citizenship - i.e., freedom - of a minority community with an intolerable weakness of the nation-state. Any sign of the

political equality of the minority becomes not only a sign of treason (by minorities and their sympathizers), but a sign of the superior power of the minority, inverting the actual status quo in a perverse nightmare of Hindus 'losing control of their own country.' The ultimate version of that nightmare is the frequently-expressed anxiety about the 'Muslim birth-rate,' or the fear that Hindus will cease to be a majority in India. Not only is this highly paranoid and numerically improbable, it negates a basic principle of the liberal-democratic nation state, which is that there can be no permanent majority and minority. Today's minority must, hypothetically, be able to become tomorrow's majority without nullifying the nationhood that is expressed in the state. If that prospect is so horrifying that one would rather resort to ethnic cleansing or invent a mythology of appeasement/treason, then it is necessary to ask what kind of nation Hindus (or Israeli Jews who resent having to share their state with Arabs, or white Trump supporters who also complain incessantly about 'pampered' minorities and the 'neglected' majority) inhabit. An objectively dominant majority that feels, acts and speaks in the mode of an oppressed and aggrieved minority is one of the surest symptoms of fascism. It is a danger to itself as well as to others, because its peevish violence inevitable rebounds against itself, eroding its own democratic rights and freedoms. That erosion, in which the state has repeatedly compromised its own liberal principles at the behest of the majority, is where 'appeasement' is truly manifested in India.

In this situation, ironically, the fate of liberal democracy comes to rest more with the minority, which is invested in it, than with the majority, which chafes against it and longs for the unrestrained ability to coerce. The idea that minorities are the conscience-keepers of liberalism has a history that goes back to the early twentieth century. It has generated one of the roles played by Jews in American political life until the late 1960s, and as Faisal Devji has pointed out, by Muslims at one point in the history of the subcontinent. I will go a step further and suggest that democracy needs minorities to survive. Majorities are thuggish by nature, undeserving of democracy and resentful of it. They do not ensure the democratic rights of minorities; it is the other way around. Freedom - understood as a rights-bearing relationship with the liberal state - is inherently a minority condition.

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Hometowns and ghost towns



Most modern societies have a romance of the hometown: a place that ‘one is from,’ and that serves as an anchor of reference and identity when one is adrift, happily or unhappily. It - or rather, the idea of it - provides continuity when the spaces and compartments we inhabit collapse or converge. In much of the world, the hometown is detached from everyday life. It is a place that one has left behind, and that functions as an identifier even when a permanent return is unlikely. In the refugee and migrant worlds of India, Pakistan and Bangladesh, for instance, hometowns have been not only the places left behind as people moved in search of education, work, safety and nationalities, but also the unseen places that parents and grandparents had once known. Such hometowns - Pabna, Lucknow, Lahore - are constituted by the thinnest of nostalgia. A cousin of mine recently crossed the India-Bangladesh border to see the ancestral family home in Dhaka (‘lost’ since 1947), could not find the building, went back disappointed, and only later realized that he had gone to the wrong address.

The American hometown is less ethereal. It is a place that one has never left. Its heart is the local high school, with its football rituals that one continues to attend as an adult, and mascots that one continues to revere. Those who actually play football or basketball expect to be recognized and flattered at the local hardware store or diner, or to run the store itself someday. Students graduate from these schools - which their parents also attended - with the expectation that they will never leave town. Their circle of acquaintances will not expand much further beyond those who are already their friends and enemies. They will, they hope, find jobs or take over family businesses that allow them to marry and have kids, to divorce and pay child support, to buy a home and a couple of cars, to retire, sicken and die with dignity.

That hometown is easy to find but hard to hold on to. It is, one might say, a mythology of community and reassurance in a vast, thinly populated land, where pioneers could go only so far before needing to stop. The place where you stopped became home: homestead, little house on the prairie, island in the wilderness, Mayberry, surrounded by the combination of emptiness and savagery that gives shape and meaning to the settler colony. Unarguably, only a part of America has actually lived even a portion of this dream, and today the hometown is more beleaguered than ever. The savages have multiplied faster than the homesteaders, and the economy has moved to the wilderness of university towns, coastal cities and foreign parts, demanding that people follow. The wilderness is also America, a competing myth with its own power and cruelties, but without that paranoid insularity.

The American hometown is a historical phenomenon. It is a product of datable, identifiable and intersecting episodes in the recent past: industrial employment, unionized wages, job security, home ownership and welfare assurance, brought together by the New Deal, the Second World War, the unchallenged manufacturing

hegemony of the 1950s, and the Great Society programs of the 1960s. These brave new hometowns fattened on the mythical homesteads; the self-righteous and existentially imperiled innocence of William Jennings Bryan became the images and soundtracks of the multi-layered 'security' that was a central part of American 'greatness' at a particular moment in time, which was the Cold War.

When the Cold War economy unraveled, hometowns became unsustainable. High school degrees became inadequate for securing jobs, and the self-inflicted injuries of the Reagan era not only weakened the unions that had allowed white workers to live middle class lives, but also began to gut the concept and institutions of social security. It became necessary to contemplate Tom Joad all over again, and this could only be a stepping down from greatness. People who should have left found themselves unable to contemplate actually leaving, because they imagined they would be leaving themselves behind, and because they were afraid of where they might have had to go. Not surprisingly, it was in this period - the 1980s - that the hometown was reified as a melancholy myth of an endangered American identity: the subject matter of Bruce Springsteen's songs, charged with betrayal. Because that betrayed place had been more real between the 1940s and the 1970s than, say, in Bryan's time, it was now that much more frightening to see it turning into yet another American mythology of place: the ghost town, in which you were the ghost.

In the last election, the ghosts turned out in force to vote for Donald Trump. In the process, they aggravated the injury that their Reagan-loving parents had inflicted. They did so for reasons that have to do with the nature of the hometown itself: the security and superiority conveyed by the conviction of roots in the soil and separateness from the rootless, and, of course, fear of being uprooted. They did not just vote for a fascist leadership that is contemptuous of every liberal safeguard

within democracy; they revealed the Volkisch underpinnings and fascist possibilities of an existentially insecure Homeland made up of hometowns, in which folksiness is an established political idiom, indulged without reflection by liberals and conservatives alike.

The fetish of roots and the folk's fear of the unrooted is, of course, a common aspect of fascism. It brings together entitlement and anxiety, typically expressed as racism, because race is among other things a perceived relationship to place. Those who are out of place, without a place, or indifferent to place are not only races apart, but also racial enemies and enemies of race itself. Like any matter out of place, they constitute dirt: the dirty Jew in Germany, the dirty Arab in Israel, the dirty Mexican in the American southwest, refugees in upstate New York, immigrants everywhere. And as dirt in the age of sanitation, they are invitations to cleansing and other forms of intervention. As animals that have wandered in from the wilderness, they threaten the hometown resident with the prospect of invasion, or of having to enter the wilderness himself. It generates music like "Welcome to the Jungle," the Indiana redneck's response to Los Angeles.

Along with the fear of savages and animals, the prospect of being exiled to the jungle brings the fear of emasculation. The narrative of the American hometown is a richly gendered text, consisting not only of the culture of team sports, guns, pick-up trucks (or muscle cars) and the predictable comfort of marrying your 'high school sweetheart,' but also the ritualized expectation that you will, upon graduation, become a newly-carded member of the same labor union to which your father belongs. When these expectations and rituals become threadbare even as mythology, the crisis of manhood takes the form of racist, homophobic and misogynistic violence, and overrides rational calculations of economic and political self-interest, not to

mention ethical considerations and the niceties of liberal democracy, which can only appear effeminate. It produces the compulsive bullying and the stormtrooper phenomena that Arthur Rosenberg identified, in 1934, as the essential ingredient of full-blown fascism.

The citizen in that mode of reaction functions as a modern peasant, hostile to science, even more hostile to the arts, resentful of educated outsiders and of education itself. (The American high school is primarily a location of socialization, and only secondarily of learning.) The modern peasant is, in one sense, a contradiction in terms, but is actually a common creature. He or she retains the provinciality of the peasant and the fetish of the soil, but it is now national soil, and suspicious outsiders are national enemies. The forms of hate remain familiar and assimilate the old, but the content is substantially new. Hannah Arendt once remarked of European anti-Semitism that it was ‘not about the Jews,’ indicating a difference between the ‘classical’ pogroms of rural bigots and the nineteenth-century urban Gentile’s dislike of the emancipated Jew. The new hate, she suggested, was more about the nationalizing citizen’s resentful relationship with the liberal state and its allies. The particular target was incidental. In present-day America, it would be inaccurate to say that the racism, anti-intellectualism and gender norms of the hometown are merely byproducts of a government policy or even a cluster of policies such as neoliberal capitalism; they are imbedded in much deeper histories of the settlement of the continent. But they are nevertheless intertwined with global economic currents that have made the American hometown obsolete, and made it necessary for the peasants to do what other peasants have typically done, which is to embrace the city. The obsolescence of the hometown is inseparable from the reluctance of its denizens to do move to where the colleges are, where the jobs are, where the strangers and savages are.

The American hometown - which is not just a place, but an idea in which Trump and Springsteen are both complicit - is not a benign sentimentality. It is a nostalgia of arrested development, intertwined with white privilege, violent masculinity, and the fundamentally unreasonable and unhealthy refusal to grow up and leave home. There is something pathological about a political reality in which adults who cling to their high school selves vote for a man who consistently behaves like a spoiled child. It is, after all, not rational to confuse cities and the wilderness, or to expect that manufacturing jobs that have disappeared due to automation will return if foreign-made products are hit with tariffs, or to act as if the mass deportation of undocumented aliens will help unemployed Americans who do not want to pick oranges or drive cabs. It is irrational to be terrified of Muslims when the overwhelming share of the killing in this country is done by Christians, and by the police. Rationality in political decision-making may be unfashionable and 'elitist' (on this point, there is a perverse agreement between the far right and the post-modern left), but if we are going to have a modern state, then the primacy of verifiable information over 'feelings' in governance is an essential hedge against fascism.

February 9, 2017

Posted by [Satadru Sen](#) at [10:02 PM](#) [Links to this post](#)

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Some of my best friends are white



So much has been written and is being written about why Donald Trump won the 2016 election that I do not think I can add anything original. Nevertheless, at times like this, there is an irrepressible need to shout, if only to remind yourself that you are awake. I will, therefore, shout briefly about what we in this country stand to lose, and about how we – the non-white minority – can retain some form of kinship with those who voted for this calamity.

That it is a calamity is undeniable. It is no use arguing that Trump's declared agenda is just campaign rhetoric, or that he will be mellowed by power, or restrained by conscientious colleagues, or disciplined by the responsibilities of governance. With both houses of Congress, the White House and the Supreme Court in Republican hands, and most of the Republican Party cynically (and predictably) falling in line behind Trump, there will be little meaningful restraint. It is equally pointless to suggest that Trump is actually a moderate who was merely playing to the gallery. He is mainly empty: an unprepared and narcissistic novice without a secure political base, who will – out of necessity – surround himself with men whose agendas are quite real. The administrative team that he has already appointed – men like Steve Bannon, Jeff Sessions and Michael Flynn, with their undisguised virulence – has already confirmed that the next presidency will be at least as destructive as that of George W. Bush. Indeed, it will almost certainly be worse.

Overnight on November 8, a hundred years of small political victories and major civilizational gains were placed before the axes of barbarians who are, one can assume, themselves astonished at their good fortune. On the chopping block: the gains of the Progressive era, the New Deal, the Great Society, the Civil Rights Movement and the Women's Movement. More precisely, we stand to lose the regulatory state that has provided us with clean air and water, ensured the safety of toys and automobiles, protected public lands from despoliation, and given meaning to the very concept of public resources, including the idea that the state is a public resource. The incoming regime has already promised to dismantle the Environmental Protection Agency and to back out of international anti-pollution accords. Drilling in the national parks, coal-fired power plants, and all-you-can-use lead paint cannot be far behind.

On the chopping block: the welfare state that has its origins in the great white crisis of the Depression, and that has, ever since, provided Americans with a safety net of unemployment benefits, health care and security in old age. That state has ensured that although there is poverty in this country, children rarely starve or freeze to death anymore, or die on the doorsteps of the hospital. That state has also concretized the idea that the individual is not an atomized subject who is solely responsible for his successes and failures, but a member of overlapping communities of citizens, with all the advantages and disadvantages that membership involves. It has functioned as the representative of the national community in the life of the individual, underlining the principle that ‘society’ includes a relationship of support between the community and the individual. Now, to borrow a line from Margaret Thatcher, we stand at the threshold of a state premised on the notion that there is no such thing as society.

On the chopping block: the painfully won edifice of civil rights, the central moral narrative of twentieth-century America. White supremacy is the basic platform on which Trump was elected. His slogan ‘Make America Great Again’ is a direct offshoot of the Tea Party’s narrative of ‘taking our country back,’ i.e., the reclamation of the White House from a black man. When was America last ‘great’? It was, of course, in the time of Ward Cleaver, cars with tail fins, and a distinctly white-southern form of Americana: uniformly white faces at the drive-in theater and the chrome-plated diner. What is it about the 1950s that so much of American nostalgia revolves around this decade of corn-syrup well-being? Some of it has to do with prosperity and unionized manufacturing jobs, no doubt. But it is also the moment before the Civil Rights Act and federally protected voting rights, before Cesar Chavez and Chicano activism, before Muhammad Ali, before women bosses, before the Stonewall riots, before Third World immigrants, and before the Bates motel became a Patel motel. Those who think the 1950s were ‘great’ exhibit not just an economic nostalgia, but nostalgia for a racial order.

For the ‘white working class’ – which is not so much an economic status as a cultural identity – that supported Trump, ‘feeling’ economically insecure was inseparable from the intolerable insecurity of what we loosely call diversity. Voters who had no intention of picking oranges or washing dishes for a living supported a candidate who insisted we need a wall to keep Mexicans

out, and to deport them *en masse*. Anti-immigration politics is almost always a racial posture, not an economic one.

Trump's loudly articulated threats against Muslims reflect the same racial posture. Here, however, it is necessary that we separate the red herrings from the rotten fish. The aspect of the new 'Muslim policy' that has got the most publicity is a vague plan to subject Muslims to registration. Accompanied by explicit references to Japanese internment and the possibility that Muslims might be required to carry documents identifying them by religion, it has naturally raised the specter of families being herded into camps, and the Nuremberg laws. Those particular dangers are, I think, not especially acute. The rhetoric of dramatic new forms of registration and detention is for the most part a ritual of victory and a tactic of racial intimidation: a celebratory experience of hate speech without repercussions. The history of first-wave fascism is unlikely to repeat itself so exactly, and Japanese internment is not the most relevant model for what awaits Muslims in this country. The more reliable models are Guantanamo and the 'black sites' that spread like an American fungus after 2001. It is easy for liberals to forget that registration of Muslims – in the form of secret 'no fly lists,' police surveillance and FBI watch-lists – already exists. In the age of electronic data collection, these can be more subtle than garish yellow stars of David, and we can reasonably expect that they will be expanded.

When we see the Trump phenomenon as a dramatic departure from existing political norms, we sometimes miss the powerful currents of continuity that link it to the 'War on Terror.' It is, for instance, shot through with the same vision of racialized enemies who must be confronted both abroad and at home, and that was normalized not only through the news, but through television shows like *24* and *Homeland*. It exhibits the same indifference towards legal and constitutional niceties. Trump may want to bring back the use of torture, but torture never fully went away. It was merely suspended, by a sort of gentleman's agreement within the US government that has now been jettisoned by people who are uninterested in being gentlemen. When Barack Obama declined to prosecute CIA employees and members of the Bush administration for torture, he left the door open for future governments to resort to waterboarding and worse, unobstructed by legal judgments or the fear of punishment. America – in the sense of a racialized national-security state – invested in Trump well before the election. He did not come out of the blue. He came, rather, from the cracks that have been deliberately maintained within American liberalism, and that have produced different strains of fascism at different times. It is worth remembering

that fascism is not the polar opposite of democracy, especially after 1945. It is a tendency within democracy, based on the same valorization of the majority.

In these circumstances, we – minorities – can expect difficulties that are only partly unprecedented. We can expect intensified police violence, more harassment by government bureaucracies, confrontations in the streets and schoolyards with racists engaged in taking their country back, and the infringement of voting rights. Usually, the frequency and seriousness of these problems will depend upon who we are, where we are, who we are with, and how much money we have. Sometimes those things will make no difference. Some of us will have to live with an intensified fear of deportation or imprisonment. Some will lose their jobs. Some will be ‘registered,’ blacklisted or tortured. Some of these problems we will share with our white friends and colleagues; others will be ours alone. Dealing with these realities will require resilience and extraordinary political intelligence. I do not think anybody knows how it can be done. We have only begun to dread and to steel ourselves.

I will, accordingly, say nothing about how to resist, or how to ‘take our country back.’ I will instead say a few words about survival and sanity, and about community. There has been some talk – mainly from the stunned governing establishment – about ‘unity’ and ‘coming together as a country.’ This election, however, has forced us to look at our white neighbors a little differently, or at least, warily. I do not mean neighbors who scream racist epithets at black passers-by or attack hijab-wearing women on public transportation. Few of us have any desire to ‘unite’ with a lynch mob, although readers of Günter Grass and Hanif Kureishi know that the line between an assailant and a defender in a racist society is not always a sharp one. I mean the nice ones, who greet us by name when we walk into their pizzerias and take care of our children when we drop them off at school. Are they, or are they not, a part of the mob? We are quite aware that more than a few of them voted for Trump. They are, in fact, aware that we are aware; they do not want us to think of them as racist, and fall silent – out of courtesy! – when we walk in on their celebrations. For those of us who live outside the blue enclaves of the major cities, especially, they are woven into our communities, as much as we are woven into theirs.

On the one hand, we can allow that many white voters may have followed their ‘economic anxieties,’ or their feeling of ‘being abandoned’ by mainstream politicians (much-noted by the media after the election), or their desire to ‘try something different,’ whatever that means. We can accept that they did not connect the dots. We can allow that they were merely being stupid, because there is no better word for ‘trying something different’ without knowing what that ‘something’ is, or for believing that Donald Trump, of all people, is a friend of workers who want unionized jobs and an enemy of corruption. But on the other hand, we cannot ignore the reality that our white neighbors voted for a man who had the endorsement of the KKK. (When was the Klan last a factor in a presidential election? We would have to go back to the era of Woodrow Wilson.) Trump’s racist rhetoric did not bother them; they were able to see it as unimportant. The racial violence on display at his rallies, which he never repudiated, did not trouble them either. The young black protesters who were manhandled and abused by mobs confident in their strength of numbers did not matter to them.

To live alongside such neighbors is the necessary lot of minorities in any democratic nation-state. I will therefore make a counterintuitive suggestion: counterintuitive, because it flies in the face of the heroic-defiant exhortations to fight in which we are now indulging, and which are undoubtedly necessary. Let us give our neighbors the benefit of the doubt. Let us accept that most of them were not thinking about you and me when they voted. Let us accept that although they think Mexicans are our misfortune, are afraid of black people, and believe Muslims have no place in American society, they think *we* – their co-worker, or son-in-law, or even their friend – are okay. They can, on occasion, almost forget that we are not white. In other words, let us accept the ‘some of my best friends are Jews’ argument against the charge of anti-Semitism. But first, let us think about what that argument means.

People who think that immigration is a problem, but are nice to you, an individual immigrant, are making an exception. They will make that exception only as long as you do not challenge them beyond a certain point, i.e., as long as you are tactful and grateful, and accept the fundamental inequality that comes with being a minority in a democracy. But it does mean that they are able to make exceptions for individuals, and thus – in moments of forgetfulness, so to speak – to disaggregate the monolithic categories that constitute their world.

I want to suggest that the ability of the racist to make exceptions for neighbors and coworkers is not altogether a bad thing. It can function, and does function, as a mode of coexistence in majoritarianism. This is especially true when democracy has dispensed with liberalism. Even liberalism was always a self-contradictory ideology: in *On Liberty*, John Stuart Mill found it necessary to insert caveats that made it clear that in a world premised on equality, some people must be less equal than others. Moreover, as an ideological system, the multi-ethnic nation-state has its own inherent conflicts: whereas the liberal state is premised on the equality of all citizens, the idea of the nation inevitably becomes racialized and implies that ‘other’ races – i.e., other nations – have a lesser claim upon the state. This is a predicament we call ethnocracy, or the complication of liberal democracy by ethnic nationalism. America is not formally an ethnocracy, but in reality it cannot avoid the idea that some ethnicities are more American than others.

‘Muslims are nasty, but not you, dear neighbor,’ is a way of managing those contradictions. It is bad ideology, in the sense that it is both intellectually and ethically flawed. It leaves the door open for discrimination and deportation. But it is also deeply human, allowing for personal affection, friendship, protectiveness, and even tolerance – not so much their tolerance of us, as our tolerance of them.

Such flawed tolerance produces space within which we can live on an everyday basis. It also produces space within which we can organize and fight – not always with the brashness of militants, but with the guile, tact and humor of minorities in any majoritarian political order. It produces space within which we can teach – and I say this not just as an educator, but as a liberal who believes that if you can make an exception for me, you can *learn* to become uncertain about the category itself. That is undoubtedly somewhat wistful, but the wistful is a necessary component of any progressive politics.

Finally, such tolerance produces space within which we – minorities – can do some introspection of our own, and become alert to our own prejudices and hierarchies: how we treat women, homosexuals, other minorities, the poor, and anyone who is less powerful than we are. We can, in this space, become aware that power is not a black-or-white, constant, consistent thing that you

either have or do not have. Power fluctuates with every interaction and change of context. It is not a bad thing to *learn*, ourselves, from the experience of being at the receiving end.

November 19, 2016

Posted by [Satadru Sen](#) at [9:11 PM](#) [Links to this post](#)

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Surgical Strike!

Indian Militarism in a Historical Perspective



After the Pakistani surrender in 1971, Mrs. Indira Gandhi remarked that it was the first victory of Indian arms against a foreign power in two thousand years. The earlier victory, presumably, was Chandragupta Maurya's success against the Seleucid empire in 303 BC. This was bad history for various reasons, but it is not that history that concerns me here. It is, rather, the peculiarity as well as the universality of the modern Indian relationship with military power, and the place of militarism in Indian democracy. As a nation-at-arms, modern India is a case study in desire and distortion. This has been the case, arguably, since 1882, when Bankim imagined an army of patriot-sannyasis as not just the defenders but also the core citizenry of a disciplined, technologically capable nation. Bankim foreshadowed Mrs. Gandhi's view that war and victory constituted restoration to history itself; both the writer and the prime minister saw this restoration as the realization of modernity. In the past few years, however, the sharpness of the desire for a militarized subjectivity has gone far beyond the fantasies of Indian nationalists of the period before 1947. In a country where the military had a low profile even after independence, and the sight of olive uniforms was a sign of extraordinary disorder, the soldier has become a highly visible public icon. A rampant militarism has called into question the very project of modernity that was championed by the ideologues of the Indian state.

The surreal spectacles of belligerence that have become an everyday reality in India evoke the 'alternative modernities' posited by the Israeli social scientist S.N. Eisenstadt. On the one hand, news anchors on television channels catering to middle-class viewers have donned flak jackets and turned their newsrooms into 'war rooms,' where they do battle with Pakistan, Kashmiris and assorted 'terrorists.' On the other hand, villagers (also conscious of video cameras) recently placed the body of a dead Hindu - accused of lynching a Muslim for having beef in his refrigerator - in a coffin draped with the national flag, simulating a military funeral. They were affirming, not denying, the dead youth's complicity in the murder. Cricket stars and Bollywood celebrities thank the army at every public function, and declare their willingness to

die if the government would only give the order. An esoteric term like ‘surgical strike’ has become part of Indian popular culture, overflowing the circle of English literacy. (There was a time when ‘surgical strike’ implied that doctors at AIIMS had stopped working, Dilip Menon recently joked.) So has the distinctly pre-modern word ‘martyr,’ translated without irony from the Islamicate *shaheed* and used religiously to describe dead soldiers of either the secular republic or Hindu Rashtra. In more forums than ever before, the Indian soldier has become an object of reverence, and the military a sacred icon. Criticism of the armed forces and skepticism about surgical strikes have acquired the status of blasphemy: television ‘personalities’ scream at the blasphemers, self-appointed public watchdogs threaten them with prosecution or more summary forms of justice, and editors and vice chancellors have taken it upon themselves to police disrespect for ‘those guarding our borders.’

The element of self-appointment is crucial. Good citizens have stepped forward to defend the honor of the Indian soldier with such enthusiasm that the state and government have faded into the background, leaving a mob that imagines itself as the nation. I do not mean ‘mob’ merely in the generic sense of an unruly crowd, although I am not excluding that meaning either. I am, rather, using the word in the sense in which Hannah Arendt used it in *The Origins of Totalitarianism*, to describe a racist political community that cuts across economic classes and acts in the name of the state. As the mob has adopted the Indian military, Indian militarism has itself been transformed. It has become a phenomenon that is only apparently outward-directed and concerned with what we generally understand as ‘defense’ in a world of nation-states and national interests. The new function of the militarily assertive state in India is to maintain a condition of national war, or a civil war that gives meaning to the nation, within a diffuse theater of power that is generally described as ‘the border.’ Militarism in India operates with reference to established global models of modern statehood and international competition. Its primary product, however, is a local, historically specific, gap between the Indian nation and the Indian state that

secretes not only the rationales and methods of majoritarianism, but also a fascist relationship between the state and the citizen, with all the intimacy and violence that relationship implies.

Global Templates

It may be useful, at the outset, to outline the contours of militarism as a historical phenomenon. Militarism is not simply enthusiasm for military action; nor is it limited to the role played by the military in the conduct of state policy. It is quite different from the 'warlike' reputation of tribes or the 'martial' pastimes of feudal aristocracies. It is, first and foremost, an aspect and associate of nationalism: a vision of the military as an extension of the Self of the self-identified patriot, and as a facilitator of the will of the citizen. It is also a perception of incompleteness. The nation or nationalized Self is incomplete in some significant way, which can vary, but invariably completion is imagined as the product of military power, or as military power itself. Militarism is, indeed, so intertwined with nationalism that it is impossible to posit a line where one ends and the other begins, although it is not uncommon - or inaccurate - to see the former as an excess of the latter.

Joining the people, the army and the state in a triangle of mutually reinforced sovereignty, militarism has its roots in eighteenth century Europe, where Prussian royalty began dressing in military uniforms just when uniforms (and uniform militaries) in the modern sense came into existence. Prussia was not a nation-state, but its seminal place in early German nationalism can hardly be overstated. In what Benedict Anderson described as 'official nationalism,' a monarchy shoring up its

sovereignty could seek to draw upon the desires of its newly self-conceived 'people,' turning itself and its instruments - including the army - into national icons. These Germanic roots became deeper and more complex in Napoleonic France, with its cult of a national army that was also the national citizenry and a revolutionary guard, simultaneously defending the citizen, exporting the nation, and completing the revolution.

The longing for completion, more pronounced in German nationalism than in the French (because unlike revolution in France, nationhood in Germany was inherently Romantic), gained more discursive flesh in Italy and Japan. In the former, national liberation and unification were military accomplishments, and in the latter, the consumption, display and projection of military power not only underlined the nation's breaking of geopolitical shackles imposed by history (generally) and the Western powers (specifically), but its achievement of the ethos and aesthetics of technological modernity.

In each of these cases of militarism, and crucially in some others, colonialism added another dimension, beginning with Napoleon's expedition to Egypt. That dimension was race. Racism did not, of course, come fully formed into colonial warfare; it was itself shaped by that bloody history. As scholars of settler colonialism have shown, the connection between war and whiteness has a lineage that precedes Napoleon by at least a century. There is, however, a difference between the racism of settler militias and the nineteenth-century phenomenon of metropolitan publics following the colonial adventures of their armies, participating actively in those adventures, or demanding such adventures, against a racially identified enemy. The latter, while not fully separate from the former (especially in the American case), is closely affiliated with the emergence of the nation-state as the center of populism, and consequently,

the cultivation of racism as a basic content of the experience of citizenship, both in the sense of a horizontal community of 'the people' and in that of a people represented by a particular state. By the middle of the Victorian century, for instance, the infrastructure of a popular press was sufficiently advanced in Britain for the Indian Rebellion to unleash not only a temporary orgy of violent fantasies about niggers and pandies, but also a lasting culture of war memorials, boys' literature and bad poetry. The Spanish-American conflict and the subsequent campaign to retain the Philippines did something similar for the United States, effecting the transition from Indian-fighting on an internal frontier to a jingoism that nevertheless retained a strong trace of the former.

Arguably, by the turn of the twentieth century, the militarism of what is generally regarded as 'good nationalism' or 'patriotism' (Britain, the United States) had caught up with the militarism of the 'bad nationalisms' (Germany, Japan). This catching up is important, because otherwise we risk falling into a false divide. That distinction between good and bad nationalisms, which is essentially a separation between liberal-civic and ethnic conceptions of nationhood, is not fully sustainable in most contexts. But if the ethnic Self lurks not far below the surface of all nationalisms, including the avowedly liberal-civic, it owes much to the emergence of a relatively homogenous militarism that was ready for its global debut in August of 1914. This militarism proved durable enough to recover from the shock and disgust - and even the ironic sensibility, which is the deadliest antidote to nationalism - generated by the Great War.

The mechanics of this recovery are worth noting briefly. On the one hand, it was facilitated by the rise of fascism, which revitalized not only the longing for wholeness that had characterized the fantasy of national war, but also the mob-mentality that

characterized the chronic violence of the colony and the frontier, and at wartime, the imperial metropole. This mob violence was inseparable from governance itself. On the other hand, the rehabilitation of militarism after the Great War was facilitated by the Second World War, which restored and vastly strengthened the concept of the good war, and wove war more tightly into the economic, political and social fabrics of those very nations to which the enthusiasm for soldiering and large standing armies had come relatively late. The full spectrum of militarism, including the racist pleasures of colonial warfare, remained available as culture and as policy to the post-Nazi nation-state. It could undergo periods of decline, as during the 'Counterculture' of the late 1960s, but rebound easily, as during the Reagan-Thatcher era and then the 'War on Terror.'

We must ask, at this juncture, whether militarism is to be regarded as a default mode of nationalism in the world after 1945, into which the Republic of India was born. We can certainly find examples of anti-militarist nationhood in this period: Japan and to some extent Germany, nation-states that were once saturated in the glamor of military technology and the moral virtues of soldiering. Both countries continue to maintain large and powerful military forces, but without romanticizing war or nurturing a cult of the soldier. (The German case is complicated by the four-decades-long partition into two ideologically opposed states.) These, however, were very much the exceptions. If nearly all contemporary nationalism is militaristic, then is there a meaningful phenomenon called 'militarism,' or a 'militaristic society,' at which we can point? The answer, as in questions about fascism in earnestly democratic states, is 'yes and no.' No, in the sense that militarism is ubiquitous. But yes, in the sense that it has not become equally central to the articulation of political community everywhere. Moreover, even in those states where militarism is an obvious element in national politics (the United States, France), it is restrained and countered by a great variety of cultural, ideological and political mechanisms that are rooted in the same classes that anchor nationhood and the nation-state. These include not only liberal

institutions such as the robust protection of free expression, but also specific discourses - including historical 'lessons' such as the Holocaust - and traditions of dissent, including irony and individualism. Thus, when love of the military does assume a particular centrality and threatens to overwhelm other constructions of the politically engaged Self, it remains possible to identify, interrogate and even confront the phenomenon.

Superficially, Indian militarism is similar to these 'reformed' militarisms, including the post-WWII, post-Vietnam, American type. Indeed, it is often patterned after that model, with its exhortations to 'Support the Troops,' ostentatious displays of flags and 'Semper fi' stickers on windshields, and apparently inexhaustible willingness to bomb Third World countries. American militarism, however, rests very substantially upon a long and broad-based tradition of actual military service. Multiple and overlapping historical factors - old settler-colonial militias, Jacksonian frontier democracy, the absence of a true peasant class, perhaps a Scots-Irish enthusiasm for fighting, and certainly the twentieth-century history of conscription - have ensured that in spite of the controversies over elite deferments in the Vietnam years, military service in America cuts across classes and regions and includes the militarists. Those who 'support the troops' often have relatives in the armed forces, and the 'Semper fi' decal indicates that the driver is probably a Marine. In India, on the other hand, peasants constitute the great majority of troops, while the middle class - safe from conscription, which it sometimes fantasizes about but is unlikely to tolerate - has provided the officers and the cheerleaders. It is, in that sense, vicarious: removed from the actual military, and a compulsive attempt to close that distance.

That distance cannot be closed by ordinary, prosaic means. While it would be uncharitable to suggest that Indian militarists are cowards, afraid to do the fighting

they advocate, it is fair to note that military service does not fit the professional, economic and status-based aspirations of middle-class India. They have (to borrow Dick Cheney's words) other priorities, which define them as a class apart. The angst of incomplete citizenship that drives Indian militarism is located partly in that gap, which must be filled in with extravagant gestures and wild rhetoric. The gestures and the rhetoric have come to include a naked intolerance of dissent that further erodes the already weak protections of free speech - which, fundamentally, is minority speech and the minority condition itself - provided by the Indian Constitution.

The erosion and the original weakness are part of the same trend: both are based on the presumption that Indian nationhood is not only beleaguered and fragile, its most appropriate remedy is the lock-step of military discipline. Thus, while the current flowering of militarism in India is all too ready to take its rhetorical cues from America, and shares the racist element within American belligerence, it differs from the American model in that it is far more ambivalent about democracy. On the one hand, it equates democracy with majoritarianism. Militarism then becomes the defining stance of 'the people,' excluding its targets as well as its critics from the nation. On the other hand, it sees democracy itself as a weakness in the nation. The military itself then becomes not only the preferred model of nationhood, its worship becomes the solution to the weakness exposed by democratic politics. In that sense, Indian militarism is actually closer to 'crisis mode' militarisms elsewhere in the world, particularly interwar Europe (where crisis was sandwiched between two catastrophes) and Israel (where crisis is a chronic national ideology). What we are seeing in India at the present time is a sharp movement in the latter direction.

Early Indian Militarism

The perception of incompleteness - the existence of an unacceptable gap between the citizen and the soldier - is as old as Indian nationalism itself, but we can identify three distinct phases, each producing a different key of militarism but also drawing substance from earlier models and emphases. In the period between the 1880s and the 1940s, Indian nationalists had no army to call their own. They were highly conscious that an army of at least two hundred thousand Indians existed in their state, but it was not *their* state. They were, moreover, excluded from that army by the colonial regime as well as by themselves, through a combination of class, ethnic, gender and political calculations. It was not an absolute exclusion: beginning in the interwar period (and in some provisional cases, even earlier), limited numbers of Indians began to enter the officer corps of the colonial armed forces. Also, mass recruitment in Punjab during the Second World War produced an unforeseen phenomenon: the reconfiguration of demobilized soldiers - peasants equipped with military training and infected with the 'martial races' ideology of colonial ethnology - as militias that played a major role in the Partition killings. But the Indian officers were few, remote, and politically contained by their loyalty to the colonial power, and the World War II veterans were not only late on the scene, they remained a mob that 'respectable' Indian nationalism was not yet ready to own.

Consequently, when nationalist Bengalis, Maharashtrians and Punjabis imagined themselves as soldiers, they had to operate not only outside the state, but also outside the institutional realities of soldiering in India. They found their armies in the realm of pure fantasy (as in Bankim's novels), in admiration of Europe and Japan, and then in the rag-tag revolutionary societies that began to appear in India by the last decade of the nineteenth century. These pursuits were vexed not only by their detachment from strategic and even tactical realism (and containment within the domains of mysticism and adolescent play), but also by the total failure to acquire the

most basic requirement of an army: a substantial body of troops. Not only did peasants - including those groups that joined the colonial army - remain indifferent, the middle class itself was admiring but not especially engaged.

In the first decades of the twentieth century, two new trends became evident. One was epitomized by the formation in 1925 of the RSS, with its khaki uniforms, stiff-armed salutes and parade-ground drills. Inspired by the feeder units of European militarism, especially youth organizations like the Boy Scouts and the Jugendbund (the early Hitler Youth), as well as older Indian educational projects like the DAV and Ramakrishna Mission schools (which cannot themselves be termed militaristic, but which emphasized disciplined masculinity and national service), the RSS produced a level of membership, regimentation, structure and visibility that swadeshi-era revolutionary groups like Jugantar and Anushilan had never achieved. Just as importantly, RSS ideologues introduced an overtly racist way of thinking about the Indian population, about Muslims, and about the role of the nation-state in the management of enemies. The RSS could afford to be visible; it did not threaten the colonial regime. In spite of the treatises on race and governmentality, its vision of an Indian state remained curiously disconnected from any quest for independence. This was still a fantasy of war, or playing soldiers, within a playground provided by British rule, and it is only fitting that the soldiers resembled colonial police constables armed with bamboo sticks.

The other development was the emergence in India of middle class men who did not (and usually could not) join the colonial army but became visionaries of military professionalism. Unimpressed by the secretive revolutionary societies with their ineffective weapons and lack of a discernible strategic vision, these men - often boys - borrowed the framework of the colonial state and its army, but imagined themselves

as its statesmen and generals. They were Romantics, in the sense that they *felt* the need for military power as a requirement of the nationally-identified Self, but they were also rationalists, in love with technology and a chessboard vision of the world. Thus, as early as during the Great War, a young Nirad Chaudhuri would haunt the shipyards to inspect British warships, and studied the specifications of German artillery. Torn between loyalism and rebellion but imagining both as military-technological expertise, he began to hope that in the foreseeable future, either the imperial or the national leadership would invite him into its planning chambers. Others, like Rashbehari Bose and Taraknath Das, came out of the revolutionary societies of swadeshi-era Bengal, but went abroad. Traveling to Europe, America and Japan opened their eyes to a world of strategic alliances and possibilities. Having escaped the cage of a colonized land, they discovered a wider geography of oceans, navies, nation-states and nationally-identified (but internationally engaged) expatriates and revolutionaries. They became fascinated by the ongoing debates on military and diplomatic policy, and admired those who were able to articulate coherent visions of power-projection. The India they imagined and plotted for, however ineffectually, was a player on that newfound strategic map, cooperating and competing with sovereign powers and empires on terms that were not so much equal as aspirational.

Clusters of such men - many of them students - gathered in Germany, Japan, Britain and the United States. Their relations with the organized mainstream of Indian nationalism could be tense, and a part of the reason lay in their obsession with warfare. 'They are all Nietzscheans,' Lajpat Rai remarked in disgust after meeting some of them in London after the Great War. Some of the 'Nietzscheans' returned to India and became well-regarded academics and public figures. The sociologist Benoy Kumar Sarkar was the most prominent and accomplished of these, and his career - until his death the year after Indian independence - illuminates how they were simultaneously insiders and outsiders. Sarkar was both avowedly patriotic and

strikingly cosmopolitan, being literate in multiple European languages and having spent many years abroad in the world of sovereign states. He had an elaborate, complex vision of an independent Indian state as an armed player in the world, and had worked out the policies and strategies - domestic and foreign - that might allow a fledgling nation-state to maximize its power. The particulars of Sarkar's patriotism were, however, alarmingly alien to nationalist politicians: he appeared to value the state over the nation. Nehru knew Sarkar personally, but ignored him when it came to taking advice.

The ultimate exemplar of such marginalized militarism was, of course, Subhas Bose, who Sarkar idolized. Sarkar was convinced of the need for coercion in democracy, and Bose's commitment to democracy was even thinner. In Bose, we see a highly developed flowering of the strategic yearnings of Indian nationalists who were not only located outside the colonial state, but were also external to the priorities of the organized anti-colonial movement, which, by and large, had not sought to challenge the imperial power on strategic grounds. Bose's appearance at the head of the Indian National Army, attached to a government in exile and allied with Germany and Japan, came close to a realization of the militarized nation-state, albeit one that was unconvincing and abortive. His traversing of the continents - the treks to Afghanistan, the Soviet Union and Germany, the epic submarine voyage to the eastern theater of the world war, the crisscrossing of wartime Asia, the movement into Burma and India, and finally the bomber flight to nowhere (which could be Taiwan, Manchuria, Siberia, India or Japan) - was almost literally a projection of the nation into the world of war, weapons and strategic maneuvers, and an exhibition of mastery of those domains. The INA was on the losing side of the conflict, but for middle-class nationalists, it was a far more satisfying approximation of a nation at war than the much larger Indian Army or the 'India' that took its seat at the victors' table in 1945.

On the eve of independence, therefore, Indian militarism had already diverged into two streams. One was an explicitly Hindu channel, with the RSS as its climactic product. It might be categorized as paramilitary rather than military in its focus, in the sense that it was provincial, centered on the geography of the national home rather than on a map of the world. The other was relatively secular, stridently technological, and obsessed with locating the nation in a world of armed states. Its great institution was the INA, which, for all its military failures, was explicitly and recognizably a 'real' national army, and as such, a facsimile of a disciplined, homogenous and horizontal national community. Its value to the Indian patriot was that it not only functioned as a 'clean' counterpart of the messy, embarrassing and apparently pre-modern politics of caste, religion and region (which belied the very existence of the nation), but also that it allowed the middle-class nationalist to claim the horizontal community of brotherhood or nationhood as well as a vertical structure in which the commanders came from the existing socio-economic elites. No challenge to that hierarchy was seriously entertained. That, indeed, is part of the appeal of any national military, which is simultaneously flattening and top-down, potentially revolutionary but reliably conservative.

In each stream, two further patterns remained evident. One was a weak attachment to any functioning Indian state. That state remained colonized, academic, fantastic or 'alternative': the longed-for place in the modern sun that was always beyond the reach of the political machinery of nationalism. This predicament generated the second pattern, which was a premium on frustration as a hallmark of Indian militarism. To be a true believer in the nation-at-arms was to be convinced that the nation itself was suffused with indifference, and that 'politics' - effectively, the need to accommodate the agency of the masses - had encrusted and handicapped the military potential of the state.

Wars of Frustration

The next phase of Indian militarism can be identified as the period between 1947 and 1998, i.e., the years between independence and the second set of nuclear weapons tests at Pokhran. This is a paradoxical phase, because while an armed and sovereign Indian nation-state was visibly present in that half century, the army itself was not very visible, and the register of war-mongering was relatively muted. If frustration with an elusive state is a key component of militarism in India, such frustration was harder to justify in this period. It was, nevertheless, a significant and revealing period, because it became clear that the mere existence of a sovereign nation-state was not enough to generate the completeness that nationalists longed for, even when that state engaged in fighting a succession of wars. A gap remained between the state of war and the nationalist citizen.

Part of the reason for this unsatisfactory state lay in the nature of the organized nationalist leadership. The Congress after the Great War was a political machine, geared to win elections, holding together not only 'the masses' but also vast feudal and business interests that were, by and large, insular and protectionist in their outlook. Its leaders were quite aware that only a small part of their constituency 'saw' a world that was wider than India, or, at most, wider than the India-Britain relationship. Indeed, as the organization became broader based, the leaders themselves came from relatively insular, provincial constituencies. Their priorities lay in management of nationally-deployed interest groups, not 'national interests.' Moreover, with Gandhi playing a dominant role in shaping the agenda of activism, there was little room for military fantasy in the party's narrative. The obvious exceptions were Nehru and Bose, both of whom watched world affairs closely and were convinced that the Congress needed a foreign policy. But by the late 1930s, Bose

(a misfit) had been pushed out of the party, and Nehru - with his anti-fascist principles - found it increasingly difficult to articulate a strategic position that differed significantly from that of the empire and the colonial state. After 1945, Nehru had lost even his fascist enemies.

The coterie that inherited the administration of independent India in 1947 thus lacked any militaristic credentials whatsoever. Not only were they removed from the shorts-and-sticks displays of the RSS (which was, moreover, damaged by its association with Gandhi's murder), they were - as machine politicians - cut off from the strategic enthusiasts. Moreover, they did not try hard to hide their suspicion of their own armed forces, which had, after all, been the military of the colonial state, deployed against the Congress itself as recently as the Quit India Movement of 1942-44. The higher officer corps in that period was almost entirely carried over from the pre-1947 period, and while generals like Thimaiyya and Cariappa - like most Indian officers in the 1940s - were nationalists in their own right, they remained tainted by their association with the colonial regime. They were, in addition, known to be considerably to the right of the government, in the sense that they were unsympathetic to its avowed objectives of socialism and non-alignment. In the first years of Indian independence, with the civilian institutions of governance still new and fragile, the possibility of a military coup (as in Pakistan in 1958) was a real anxiety, and there was no reason for the government to encourage a cult of the armed forces. This is precisely why keeping the military out of public life was a widely accepted political norm, one which the military itself came to see as a part of its ethos. The high profile of a general (subsequently Member of Parliament) like V.K. Singh or G.D. Bakshi (who retired to become a hawkish media star) in recent years has not been the Indian norm; even the charismatic Sam Manekshaw was more circumspect.

For all that, Nehru and his colleagues were not averse to war, to the maintenance of armed forces, to the discourse of military necessity, or even to the symbolism of weaponry. Nehru signed the Armed Forces Special Powers Act, which gives soldiers immunity from prosecution in civilian courts while engaged in counterinsurgency operations. He accepted the ritual of Republic Day, when the Indian state parades its tanks and missiles like the Maharaja of Patiala parading naked and erect before his subjects. In spite of their political mismatch, the first prime minister and the senior Indian Army and Air Force officers had all wanted to expand the 1947-48 war beyond Kashmir. They were restrained only by circumstances beyond their control. Nehru had not hesitated to deploy Indian forces to the Congo in a combat role as part of the United Nations Katanga operations in 1961. The 1962 war was precipitated as much by Indian recklessness as by Chinese 'treachery.' It is worth noting that India went to war far more often in that period than subsequently. Indeed, if we count the military deployments, the numbers add up quickly: the limited war with Pakistan in 1947-48, the so-called (and extremely bloody) 'police action' in Hyderabad, the annexation of Goa, the clash with China, the wars with Pakistan in 1965 and 1971, the ill-fated intervention in the Sri Lankan civil war, and the counterinsurgency in the northeast that continues today. Indian military spending until 1962 was modest but it was not inconsiderable, and Nehru gave every indication of wanting to build up a credible structure of force, with the continuous acquisition of modern weaponry from every available source. He was, in that regard, not entirely detached from the strategic fantasists of the interwar years.

Nehru's enthusiasm for military self-assertion, however, remained unconvincing. It was tempered by his affiliation with specific ideologies - anti-colonialism, non-alignment, liberal democracy, socialism - and by an apparent respect for international mechanisms of conflict-resolution. Nehru the nationalist thus frequently came under the shadow of Nehru the internationalist. That shadow may have been spurious, because Nehru's 'internationalism' is best understood as an attempt to shape a world

order in which the victims of colonialism - including India - had a voice both within and without the established institutions. But militarism does not permit a plurality of 'victims': there can be only one relevant victim of history. The prime minister's readiness to link India's history and destiny with those of others gave him his reputation as a naïve idealist who (unlike Bose or Patel) lacked either a cold, clear sense of 'the national interest,' or the toughness to pursue it.

Even the wars that were fought in this period failed to produce a sustainable bellicosity. After some initial coverage in the press, few noticed the IPKF deployment in Sri Lanka: the long war was soon recognized as an embarrassing mistake, best ignored until it could be wound down. The 1971 conflict, with its unambiguous victory and successful defiance of American and Chinese pressure, generated much exultation, but it was contained and curtailed by the very modest Indian media infrastructure of the time. There was little in the way of television, radio had all the charisma of a bureaucracy, the press was genteel, and nowhere was there a financial incentive to turn war into culture. Moreover, Indian belligerence and celebration in 1971 were both moderated by the particular discourse of the conflict, in which the primary victim was not India, but another people. There was, in other words, no conviction of 'being wronged' on which militarism might feed and flourish, and victory produced no extended diminution of the political domain in favor of the military. Indeed, barely a year after the Pakistani surrender in Bangladesh, most Indians were more concerned with the turmoil that would climax in the Emergency, than with any newfound fetish of the military. Even the Pokhran nuclear test of 1974 brought only a brief flush of muscular narcissism.

The earlier wars were fought in an even poorer media environment than the Bangladesh conflict. In 1965, Lal Bahadur Shastri did attempt to harness some populist

zeal with the *Jai jawan, jai kisan* slogan, but middle-class militarism is an attempt to claim soldiers for the modern community, not clump them together with peasants. Shastri was operating within the old Congress mode of building political coalitions in the agricultural heartland, not asserting a modern state of war. Moreover, while the scale of the incompetence that every branch of the Indian military showed in 1965 is only now beginning to emerge, even then the outcome of the war was regarded with such ambivalence that only Shastri's death saved the government from having to answer the kinds of questions that had arisen during the war with China three years previously.

Incompetence, particularly the military variety, is more historically and ideologically meaningful than incompetents are usually given credit for. The 1962 war was a shocking spectacle of incompetence on all fronts: military, political, diplomatic and bureaucratic. The incompetence was quite predictable, because war-fighting capability at that level requires institutional maturity and, more nebulously and importantly, widely disseminated habits and mentalities of modernity that can come only with universal literacy, the dismantling of feudal economic relations, and an ethos of horizontal community, i.e., equality. In India, fifteen years into independence, none of that existed. Nehru was frank enough to acknowledge that he and his colleagues in the government had been 'somewhat amateurish.' That amateurishness, which could be interpreted as either an incomplete nationhood or as unfitness for statehood, was - and remains - extremely difficult for Indian nationalists to come to terms with. It was an unnerving reminder of older narratives of incompetence, especially if one accepted the fable that the 'last victory' was two thousand years ago.

Moreover, the Indian middle class was quite comfortable with its position of privilege in a predominantly subaltern population, and had no intention of investing in the modernity of social organization that gives a tiny country like Israel its long-standing military advantage over much larger Egypt. In India, that kind of modernity would have been revolutionary. It might have required the respectable classes to make do without servants, or to eat with their servants, or to let their daughters marry their servants (and by extension, to let their daughters make other autonomous sexual choices). It is worth noting that the Indian Army itself has steadfastly refused to give up the 'orderly' system, in which officers are allowed to use enlisted men as their personal servants. (Even the Pakistan Army has given it up.) Those who celebrate the Indian soldier have not found it necessary to intervene in something so normal.

The nationalist response, therefore, was to find scapegoats. In this search, the military - not only the overt symbol of national sovereignty and potency, but also an apparently permanent institution - fared better than the elected government, which was compromised by its transient and political nature. A few generals who were known to be favorites of the government could be included among the villains, but otherwise the honor of the 'martyred' soldier had to be salvaged with narratives of political ineptitude, weakness and treachery that are as old as nationalism itself, and that have historically surfaced ("we were made to fight with one hand tied behind our back," and so on) whenever nationalists have had to deal with the inadequacies of their martial mythologies.

The second phase of the nation's relationship with the military thus had the quality of an unfinished product or a stunted animal. Having got their state, their army and their wars, those patriots who had longed for a militarily assertive nation-state found that the nation, the army and the war-fighting state were not coterminous. In the

absence of conscription or mandatory military service, the wars entered into by the state were far from being everybody's wars. On the one hand, the military and the nation could be insulated from unsatisfying wars. On the other, that possibility of insulation made all wars fall short. Moreover, while Hindu rhetoric was not entirely missing from these wars (Indira Gandhi's depiction as Durga in 1971 is the best known example), there was no sustained attempt to link the conflicts to a discourse of Hindu victimhood or revenge. Even in 1971, the potentially explosive fact that Bengali Hindus were disproportionately targeted by the Pakistani military was carefully downplayed by the Indian government and news media, not least because it would have unleashed a revenge narrative that was at odds with the priorities of the Indian state. But if these 'shortcomings' were a source of frustration for those who wanted a different kind of militarized nationhood, it must be remembered that frustration only intensifies militarism and gives it new facets. For the middle-class patriot in the 1990s, therefore, not only had the Indian/Hindu nation not fully realized itself through its army and its wars, the failure was inseparable from the emerging narrative of the 'pseudo-secular' state and its politics of 'minority appeasement.'

Mind the Gap: Militarism in the Age of Hindutva

The third phase was announced by the nuclear tests in 1998. The tears of joy on the face of the Home Minister, the jubilant crowds of men in the streets of provincial towns and major cities, and the sadhus performing Hindu religious rites near the test site (in celebration, not penance, lest anybody be confused), all broadcast on television, belong firmly within the militarism of the present day. They were, if not its starting point, its inauguration. The mini-war in Kargil, which came along conveniently the following year (a gift from the Pakistani military leadership), cemented the new model, giving us the now-familiar spectacle of television anchors

posing with artillery units and playing the hyperventilating war reporter, twenty-four-hour footage of fighter planes taking off between advertisements for cheap motorcycles and skin-whitening cream, retired generals giving blood-curdling lectures to IIT students, and personalized stories of ‘martyrs’ and ‘heroes’ who multiplied and morphed into celebrities, to be appropriated by celebrities from the world of entertainment. The soldier, the reporter, the scientist (Abdul Kalam’s status as the ‘good Muslim’ who is good because he is a missile engineer who wrote bad poetry about nuclear weapons began at this time), the celebrity, the politician and the viewer merged into a heady package of feel-good citizenship.

The critical changes that enabled these developments are, at one level, structural and easily identified. A post-1947 educational system that privileged first engineering and then business management had, by the 1980s, produced a middle class that valued technocracy and efficiency of command, and was essentially illiterate in the humanities and social sciences, seeing these not only as frivolous and effeminate pursuits, but also as subversive of the fundamental mythologies of nationhood. These included not only ‘great narratives’ like responsibility for the Partition and the role of Muslim kings in Indian history, but also lesser details like Kashmir’s place in the nation, and the definitions of commonly used terminology like ‘terrorist’ and ‘national security.’ For this unevenly educated class, the military - with its supposed efficiency, order and technical competence - was the counterpoint not only to the dirt and corruption of politicians, but also the ‘sedition’ of intellectuals. The unquestioning obedience and apparent self-sacrifice of the soldier, rather than the treacherous speech of the campus radical, was the preferred mode of citizenship. Obedience and hierarchy were long established norms within Indian nationalism, but a liberal-humanist streak had nevertheless emerged. More compromised than liberalism inevitably is by other national, racial and imperial priorities, it was a fragile but important component of Indian democracy. That liberalism was literally educated out of the middle class (and middle-class men in particular) in the three decades after

independence, as part of the quest for 'development.' When 'security' replaced 'development' as the central narrative of the Indian state in the 1990s and 2000s, it found ready acceptance.

Even more obviously, economic liberalization had expanded the scale and scope of consumerism in India. A much larger middle class, for which consumption was the most immediate marker of class identity, had sprung up, and shown itself to be highly interested in consuming war. Although this class was made possible by the economic policies initiated by the Congress in 1991, it quickly showed its greater fondness for the BJP, and its growing size and appetite for consumption - which was more than ever a form of speech, but unlike 'free' speech, compatible with majoritarian and reactionary politics - kept it from becoming irrelevant even when the BJP was out of office. Simultaneously and not coincidentally, the media infrastructure - television in particular - had become vast, omnipresent, and reoriented to sell everything that could be marketed, including, especially, itself. As a part of this marketing, it sold America, or at any rate, a version and aspect of America that also emerged in 1991, with CNN's coverage of the war against Iraq. This America, viewed in its own context, was grounded in the Reagan-era makeover of the crises of imperialism generated by the Vietnam War. For Indian television producers and audiences, however, it was a shiny, seductive and aspirational vision of power undiluted by irony or self-doubt, in which images of missile launches and unbloodied soldiers functioned as shorthand for having arrived at the global shopping mall. Sometimes the soldiers were pictured dead, bandaged or decorously boxed and flag-draped, but never in large numbers. The American lesson from Vietnam came ready-made and packaged: the 'martyr' had to remain a vicarious Self, distant enough and few enough to be quasi-fictional and unthreatening.

At another level, the changes that made the second phase of Indian militarism possible are ideological and harder to isolate. The new middle class was not fully separate from the old, but it partially swallowed and digested its predecessor. In the process, it produced bastardized versions of the strategic and military-technological preoccupations that went back almost a century, and added the overtly Hindu-nationalist and racist elements that had been contained within the RSS-affiliated fringe. After 1998, when the BJP demonstrated its ability to form and lead a governing coalition, the cult of the Indian soldier also became an apparent reconciliation of the nation and the state. In this new political environment, soldier-worship was a part of how the BJP differentiated itself from the Congress and the Left parties. This was not so much the transcendence of the 'domestic' agenda of Ayodhya and anti-Muslim pogroms, as its extension to the domain of foreign affairs. It was, in that sense, the reconciliation of the RSS and INA streams of Indian militarism, and a transition from the militarism of frustration to a militarism of triumphalism. (It has become popular for the Hindu right to seek to co-opt the INA itself, by describing it, rather than the Congress, as the true precipitator of Indian independence.)

The nature of that triumph is highly ambiguous, because the nationalist understanding of foreign affairs was itself transformed as a result of its capture by those who had concerned themselves primarily with a different history. The older emphasis on inserting the nation into a world of strategy and power that had its own autonomous existence was replaced by a vision of the world as a theater of Hindu-nationalist historical revenge: a delusional self-centeredness and provinciality that would have been quite comical to Sarkar, Bose and their contemporary advocates of Realpolitik in foreign policy. Moreover, it is evident that some of the players on this stage have left the Indian state that was acquired in 1947, and are looking for a posture of holding on. Provinciality, thus, has had to find common ground with deracination. The consequence has been a highly stressed nationalism that must protect itself from fragmentation by posing with weapons and soldiers. It would be difficult to find a

better example of this phenomenon than the tendency of some Indian-Americans to see Donald Trump as an ally, and the bizarre show they staged in Trump's honor in New Jersey. Indian dancers were 'attacked' by light-saber-wielding 'terrorists' speaking faux-Arabic, and rescued by American commandos, following which everybody grabbed an American flag and did a Bollywood-style dance to Bruce Springsteen's "Born in the USA."

We have here what is literally a new world: the distortion of the strategic globe into a flat earth, or perhaps one of Eisenstadt's alternative modernities. The performance in New Jersey was not satire. Nor was it simply the muddled loyalties of immigrants in an era in which concepts like 'emigration' and 'immigration' have become obsolete, and ties to the old country are kept alive by frequent travel, unbroken families, the Internet, globalized Bollywood and state-sponsored schemes of dual citizenship. It represented, rather, the performance of a nationalized subjectivity that needed the state (or multiple states) as a prop and an embellishment, but was not wedded to any particular state, any more than a peasant is wedded to a particular state. It is also representative of the hyper-nationalist who has emigrated to an imperfectly understood world without actually leaving home. The well-known NRI or Non-Resident Indian (affluent first-generation Indian immigrants in the West, a key source of support for the Hindu right wing in India) is paralleled by the less famous Indian in Gujarat and Haryana whose nationalism is rendered desperate by his envy of New Jersey. His triumphalism is interwoven with desire for what one would like to purchase but cannot afford, and he continuously becomes a cheap, distorted copy of the foreign patriot.

That distorted and distorting foreigner, while generally American, carries more purpose-specific passports as well. The most common such passport, for the Indian

militarist, is Israeli. This is not entirely new (Israel has long had its Indian admirers) but it has taken on a new dimension lately with the Indian prime minister's explicit mention of the Israeli military as a model for the Indian. Israeli references are important in Hindutva for many reasons, but two in particular concern me here. One is the historical distortion that becomes inevitable when a nation of more than a billion people, with deeply rooted and widely manifested traditions of ethno-religious intertwining and coexistence, seeks to model itself on a garrison state of six million that is also a settler colony, an ethnocracy and an occupying power. The other is a political and ideological effect. Israeli militarism is, among other things, the projection outwards of an enmity that is internal to the population of the state. The Israeli outlook on the world reflects not only the Holocaust, but also a paranoid expectation that 'it could happen again,' executed by Palestinians or 'Arabs.' This expectation makes it virtually impossible for the Israeli state to operate in the world in the mode of a normal power; it must forever function as a rogue state (albeit with powerful friends), interpreting the world in the light of its internal struggle. This predicament is an existential incompleteness: a gap between the (Israeli) state that includes Palestinians, and the (Jewish) nation that does not. As noted earlier, a similar gap between the nation and the state has long marked Indian militarism, and functioned as a source of frustration. Now, however, it is functioning as the norm. The gap is there to be maintained, and the state is there to preserve it. We can say that the gap between the nation and the state has been closed in India only in the sense that the state now manages the gap.

The gap can manifest itself as a strategic space, a state of exception, a campus, or Kashmir. It is the space in which Muslims must live (or conversely, be discouraged from renting or buying a home) as aliens and racial inferiors; it is also the space in which Hindus can maneuver between being global citizens engaged in something as cosmopolitan as the 'war on terror,' and being ethnic nationalists who feel oppressed by an 'appeased' minority. Within it, they can be citizens of a constitutional

democracy, but also seek to intimidate or lock up ‘anti-national’ scholars, and punish actors who refuse to come out as anti-Pakistan. It can manifest itself as ‘the border’: a curious terminology, reminiscent of the old American concept of ‘the frontier,’ that has come to permeate Indian culture, from war movies (straightforwardly titled ‘Border’) to everyday exhortations to remember that ‘soldiers are dying on the border.’ In the makeshift modernity of the Indian nation, which never had borders before the colonial state, the border is now everywhere. It is not simply where the Indian state meets the Pakistani state. It is, rather, where the Indian nation that has triumphantly taken possession of its state meets its inner, inescapable, essential Pakistan. It has been remarked that the Pakistani state that emerged in 1947 was so suddenly improvised that it had a magical, ethereal quality. It might be added that many Hindus found it considerably easier to realize Pakistan: it was always next door, no matter where one lived. The border in India is a state of mind, i.e., a norm of governance and citizenship.

Signifying the border has become the most specific function of the armed forces. The most obvious site of this signifying is, of course, Kashmir, which has become not so much a physical space as a toxic cloud of permissions, restrictions and sentimentalities. Here, the state can torture, maim, kill and impose curfews with impunity, because such governance is permitted by the special quality of the national border. Criticism of that permission is immediately dismissed as sentimentality, and this dismissal or silencing is made possible by the actual sentimentality, which is the cult of the brave jawan. The belligerence with which a talk show host insists that nobody can impugn the ‘honor’ of the Indian soldier is derived from the same ‘border’ that nurtures (and needs) a Nehru-era law like the Armed Forces Special Powers Act, but it is the extension of that border into the living rooms of civilians. The safer those civilians are, the more unsafe they claim to feel, and the more thankful they become ‘to those guarding our border.’ Grateful patriots show their gratitude by assaulting a handicapped cinema-goer who did not stand for the national anthem (a new

requirement at Indian movie theaters), and by demanding that such ingrates be arrested. The police have duly obliged, and their action defended by Bollywood stars, because, well, 'soldiers are dying.' A concept like the 'honor' of the soldier, enforced by the civilian mob, becomes utterly incompatible with democracy, although it may not be out of place in the Klingon Empire. Yet it is precisely because democracy has put down tenacious roots in India that militarism is more dangerous there than in states where the army is in control. In India, the distortion of democracy comes from the people: i.e., from democracy itself.

Conclusions

Under specific and unusual circumstances, usually involving catastrophic and total defeat in war, nationalism can be purged of militarism. In India, such purging is inconceivable, not only because India has not known war on that scale, but also because India's military engagements have been limited to the domain of the state. The nation, meanwhile, has fought other wars: wars of desire for a state, wars of strategic fantasy, wars of frustration, wars in khaki shorts, wars with light-sabers, wars with kerosene cans, and wars of historical compensation. It is the latter set of wars that convey the force and menace of Indian militarism, and the implications of the new obsession with 'security.' That word no longer refers to a serious concern with war between states, or even to 'defense,' which does not require a military fetish. It refers, rather, to an agenda of ethnic domination and authoritarianism. The greatest menace of Indian militarism is the lynch mob continuously demarcating its borders, demanding and often getting the help of the state in locking a minority into the role of a foreign enemy.

In a society in which nationalism has been a highly uneven phenomenon, meaning substantially different things to elites, subalterns, provincials and emigrants, the idea of the nation-at-war provides certain pleasures and reassurances: cohesion, community, a modality of post-liberal citizenship and post-political governance. It provides, moreover, a link between the nation one inhabits, the state one does not confidently own, and the world one cannot fully inhabit. Militarism welds together not only India and America, the neighborhood and the border, but also the 'strategic' mentality of a Bose or Sarkar and the provincial Hindu chauvinism of Narendra Modi. Both are authoritarian - and in some regards, fascist - outlooks on power. But whereas the earlier militarism came with the fantasy of a secular, modernizing state that might restrain and retrain the mob, the other reflects a racist majoritarianism: the phenomenon of the mob that wears the state as its badge.

Enshrouded as he is in a fog of insults and honor, the dying soldier has finally accomplished something that eluded Indian nationalists for a very long time: the production of the citizen-soldier, whose homes, streets, schools and movie houses are all the national border. This citizen-soldier is a fake, in the sense that unlike the Israeli and even the American civilian, he (and increasingly, she) does not expect to join the army. But since the border (or 'Kashmir') is now everywhere, he too is constantly engaged in guarding it. Even a cow-protection gang or a lynch mob killing a neighborhood Muslim (who, ironically, had a son in the military) imagines itself to be the Indian Army, fighting its local Pakistan. Like its middle-class counterpart, it is uninterested in fighting anything else, or even in seeing a world beyond this omnipresent 'Pakistan.' In that sense, it is part of the same mob.

The consequences of this militarism are, accordingly, both farcical and alarming. It is not actually the case that the Indian state will go to war at any moment. Even after

the ‘cowardly terrorist’ incident at Uri, in which nearly twenty soldiers were killed by four Pakistan-trained militants, the Indian armed response was highly restrained: it consisted, at the most, of a shallow cross-border commando operation. The Indian response to the Kargil incursion, too, was marked by its restraint. What was not restrained was the cascade of moral judgment (the ‘terrorists’ had to be ‘cowardly,’ lest the army be deemed incompetent), and then the illiterate but quasi-American rhetoric of surgical strikes, the gloating, and the display of public bellicosity. It is a bellicosity that has both aided the state (that arrests and kills some people) and been abetted by it (with the refusal to arrest or kill others). It has forced the old-style military enthusiasts - who romanticized fighting machines and held back from looking too closely at what the military was doing in Manipur and Mizoram, but were nevertheless attached to a state that was secular, democratic and inclusive - to share their platforms with the staggering coarseness of those who see Muslims as the national enemy and racial inferiors. Indeed, the former have yielded their platforms and their authority to the latter, and increasingly there is no way to romanticize the Indian military without also endorsing the rest of Indian militarism: Kashmir, AFSPA, mandatory patriotic rituals, the beating and jailing of student activists, the cravenness of the media, and of course the kerosene cans.

October 25, 2016

Sport and Leisure in Modern India



A great variety of activities might be placed under the heading of “sports and leisure” in modern India. The variety lies not only in the number, but also in the ways in which these activities are organized, and in the fragmented concepts of sport, games, play and leisure. Generally speaking, rituals that are recognized as “sports” are bureaucratically and financially organized, affiliated with Indian nationhood, associated with urban and upper-class populations, and – unlike “play” – associated with childhood as well as adulthood, marking a bridge between the two that the modern subject is expected not so much to cross as to inhabit. While this is not peculiar to India, the Indian case illustrates the enormous gradations within the process of sport-making that are inevitable in an unevenly modern society, where language itself – the translation from the vernacular *khel* to the English *sport* – can disguise subtle and not-so-subtle differences between what a “leisure activity” means to those who engage in it. At one level, the boundaries and limits of the games Indians play, their “successes” and “failures,” are closely aligned with those of being Indian in the world. At another level, they function semi-autonomously of the world, as elements of a vernacular subjectivity. This vernacular subjectivity should not be regarded as anti-modern or a pre-modern residue. It exists in a state of continuous, context-driven and mutual influence with the organized, nationalized, “properly modern” world of international competition.

Colonial Origins and Indigenous Experiments

Nearly all major sports that Indians play and follow today – cricket, football (soccer), hockey, tennis, badminton, competitive track-and-field – are colonial imports that came to India with the consolidation of British rule in the nineteenth century, and were widely absorbed as part of the nationalist response to British rule in the later Victorian period. They were introduced by colonial educators to the children of the princely and feudal elites of India, as part of an effort to bond those classes to the empire after the Rebellion of 1857 had been crushed. Polo, which had older roots in a wide region including not only India but Iran and Central Asia, was transformed by British educators and army officers in the same period, producing a modern sport with teams, standardized rules and norms of training, that a tamed native aristocracy could play with its imperial overlords. The enterprise was broadly pedagogical, teaching distinct models of being a child (that played sports) and an adult (that continued to play the same games, and valued childhood play as a building block of adulthood). As in contemporary England, therefore, a close connection was maintained in India between education, childhood and sport. Imperial children were encouraged to play games that had more significance than mere “child’s play.”

When it came to a wider popularization of sports in India, however, the British were ambivalent and often hostile. Games like cricket and football were closely tied to white racial identity. Not only was it unclear that Indians could play them, it was also unclear that they should. The Indian adoption of imported games in the late nineteenth century, and their incorporation into a self-consciously modern subjectivity, were therefore implicitly and sometimes explicitly defiant of colonial power relations. To a great extent, this indigenized “foreign” games: learning and playing them went hand in hand with the assertion of Indianness.

It is not that there were no alternatives to English sports. The emerging Indian middle class, which became the demographic of cricket, football and nationhood in India, knew that pre-colonial sporting traditions could be found in what they were now describing as “Indian culture.”

Epic and folk literature contained voluminous accounts of competitive archery and mace-fighting. These intrigued modern Indian consumers of the past, especially those interested in discovering martial traditions. Wrestling, which had an independent pedigree in rural northern India, became a recognized form of exercise as well as a statement of militant masculinity among middle-class youth, particularly in Bengal and Maharashtra, as “Extremist” discourse and revolutionary terrorism became the major idioms of nationalist politics. So did “stick play,” or mock-fighting with staves. During the Swadeshi movement in Bengal in the years following the unpopular British decision to partition the province, for instance, middle-class revolutionaries like Pulin Das – taking their cues from the nationalist writer Bankim Chandra Chatterjee – enlisted their social inferiors to teach them stick play, not so much because they imagined driving the British from India with sticks, as because such “play” was an experience of discipline, community and political confidence.

Wrestling and Olympic Nationhood

Wrestling and other forms of mock-fighting, did not, however, take hold as middle-class sports. Within the vanguard of Indian nationhood, few practiced them, and none “followed” them in the manner in which fans or supporters “follow” sports. They had none of the dominant characteristics of modern sport: no organization, no financial base, no modalities by which spectators and “fans” might identify with teams and athletes, and no widely accepted connection with leisure. Moreover, while they could signify an authentic Indian past, they proved difficult to recover for the present. The skills were esoteric, fit readily neither into urban life nor into the colonial school, and were tainted by their association with tribal and lower-caste populations. They provided fodder for the romantic imagination, but could not compete with the English sports that were securely anchored in the Macaulayan curriculum of colonial subjectivity. The native elites were irrevocably invested in that curriculum, in the sense that they had invested in

the adulthood and adult world that children educated in government-affiliated schools were expected to grow into. They did not significantly deviate from it when they created their own educational institutions, such as the Dayananda Anglo-Vedic and Ramakrishna Mission schools for boys, or – in a parallel stream of nationhood – Aligarh College.

At the same time, “recovered” forms of play did not disappear altogether. Wrestling survived, and even thrived, in arenas that were not initially intended for subaltern sports. The reasons have to do with the politics of representation in a colonial society. While Britain was unwilling to contemplate Indian independence before the Second World War, it was willing to concede an independence of sorts in the world of sport, particularly when the “Indian team” remained under overall British control and tutelage. India was thus represented at the 1900 Paris Olympic Games, although the sole representative was the Anglo-Indian Norman Pritchard. (Pritchard won two silver medals in track and field events.) More importantly, while middle class Indians were inconsistent and half-hearted about subaltern pastimes, colonial administrators were sometimes receptive to cultural forms that signified authenticity, and native elites could support such endeavors even when they did not themselves play the game. Subaltern successes in international sport could be appropriated by those who cared about national prestige. Beginning in Antwerp in 1920, Indian wrestlers began to appear regularly in the Olympics with the backing of British as well as Indian patrons, although they would not actually win a medal until K.D. Jadhav won a bronze in Helsinki in 1952.

The nationalization (and internationalization) of Indian wrestling accelerated the partial transformation of an activity that had previously drifted imprecisely across the lines of religion and rustic community, modernizing it into a sport, and supplementing the old *akharas* (wrestling societies) of Benaras with globally applicable regimes of coaching and classification. The *akhara* and Olympic wrestling were not distinct worlds; they leached into each other, and most

importantly, they drew from the same rural and small-town pools of subaltern wrestlers. These young men from the hinterland, with ideas about diet, exercise and moral conduct that were apparently peculiar to their rural milieu, acquired a limited access to the discourses, practices and opportunities of a wider world – limited not only by their marginal class status, but also by their own sense of what was appropriately modern. They and their sport represent the contextual and “alternative” modernity of the subaltern that inhabits a nation that is only contingently that of the middle-class nationalist who cheers for the national team. The same can be said for Indians who play organized, competitive *kabaddi*, first demonstrated internationally at the Berlin Olympics of 1936. *Kabaddi* is not a prestige sport, and middle-class adults generally do not play it seriously. (Serious play is itself a middle class idea.) But it has nevertheless become an activity that is “serious” for people from the vernacular classes that exist between the ideal types of “peasants” and “the middle class,” and can contingently represent India in the world.

Since Jadhav’s medal in Helsinki, only a handful of Indian wrestlers – Sushil Kumar, Yogeshwar Dutt and Sakshi Malik – have been successful at the Olympics. Sakshi Malik’s bronze in 2016 reflects the mutable, transforming nature of subaltern and provincial sporting traditions: on the margins of middle-class respectability, women have found a niche that eluded them both in the *akhara* and in the convent school. It is, nevertheless, a paltry tally that reflects the notoriously poor Indian record at the Olympics, where decades of participation have yielded little by way of medals. Indian athletes do poorly at track and field events and most other forms of individual contest, largely because middle-class Indians are not invested in such contests, taking notice briefly only when a compatriot surprises them by winning internationally. The network of schools and regular tournaments through which talent can be identified, nurtured and funneled upward is entirely underdeveloped. A promising young athlete has almost no chance of finding a reliable ladder of school, city, district, state and national level competitions. Even at elite private schools, track and field athletics have no institutional support, and there is little in the way of

facilities, coaching or organized competition. Swimming pools are non-existent and few urban Indians can swim.

In the government schools, where these schools exist at all, the lack of support for athletics is even more acute. The failure of the Indian state to invest in primary and secondary education, not to mention the wider problems of poverty, malnutrition and ill-health below the middle class, has severely curtailed the emergence of subaltern athletes, who literally have nowhere to begin. Indian runners, jumpers and swimmers have had neither the state-directed support that the Chinese and Eastern European states gave their athletes, nor the combination of civil society and market endorsement that has driven athletic success in the western world. World-class track athletes like P.T. Usha, who fell just short of Olympic success in the 1980s, and before her Milkha Singh (who also barely missed an Olympic medal), are aberrations who shone in spite of the Indian “system,” not because of it. That fourth-place “consolation prize” was also the fate of Dipa Karmakar in gymnastics in the 2016 Rio games.) The system, generally speaking, is the lack of any system at all, or a threadbare infrastructure of nationhood. (There are exceptions at the state level. P.T. Usha’s home state of Kerala is notable for both its investment in literacy and its production of track athletes.)

The Hockey Nation

A different kind of Olympic aberration can be found in Indian hockey. Between the 1920s and the 1960s, and even until 1980, India was phenomenally successful in international hockey, winning eleven Olympic medals, including eight golds. That success and its rapid and total evaporation are both revealing. Much of the credit for the promotion of hockey in colonial India

is due to the army, which encouraged soldiers to play the game. Not surprisingly, Punjab – a region with disproportionate military recruitment – became the major base of Indian hockey even before Olympic success made the sport a source of national satisfaction. While the participation of enlisted men gave the game a wide base in class, it was limited by region and to some extent by the institution of the military itself. Outside its original enclaves, the game was not played, coached, organized, watched or sponsored with any consistency or seriousness. India was a “hockey nation” much more in the sense that the national team won a lot of competitions, than in the sense of a general love of the sport.

In spite of the emergence of individual stars like the brothers Dhyan Chand and Roop Singh, the infrastructure for producing world-class players remained limited. The most basic failure, as in track and field or swimming, was the official indifference to universal education: relatively few children learned to play the sport competitively. Success that rested on so frail a platform could not be sustained. In the 1960s, the technology of the international game changed, most dramatically with the adoption of artificial turf. Not only was artificial turf not affordable or easily available in India, it called for sharply revised techniques of playing and coaching, which required an elaborate organizational apparatus that had not emerged. The Indian reliance on the excellence of individual players proved to be insufficient, given the limits of the hockey-playing population. Later in the twentieth century, changes in the international rules of the game – particularly the elimination of the offside rule – further disadvantaged Indian players, who were accustomed to playing a game of close control of the ball and not long passing. Hockey survives in India, but the hockey nation was a chimera.

It is worth noting that the fate of hockey in neighboring Pakistan has been both similar and different. There, as in India, the standard of the game was very high well into the 1960s and 1970s, and the army and Punjab constituted the primary soil in which hockey was rooted. There

too, changes in technology and technique adversely affected the competitiveness of the national team. Nevertheless, Pakistani hockey was spared the devastation the sport suffered in India, because the military and Punjab have typically possessed greater political and economic clout in Pakistan than in India. The organizational and demographic base of Pakistani hockey was stronger and more extensive, and Pakistan remains a “hockey power,” although a diminished one.

Football and Revolutionary Manhood

The history of hockey in the subcontinent is a part of the history of team sports, and inseparable from the success that team sports have enjoyed – in results and in popular support – relative to individual athletics. To people engaged in imagining themselves as a public and a nation, or as national communities, the idea of a team had an appeal that solitary competitors could not achieve as readily. This was particularly true for a public that perceived its colonized condition to be a consequence of disunity, and, indeed, of an inability to come together in a disciplined and purposeful manner. Teams thus possessed an inherent assertiveness, and those that coalesced without immediate British supervision lent themselves easily to nationalism.

That dynamic became evident in football, particularly in Bengal, beginning early in the twentieth century. Club football in the city of Calcutta (Kolkata) took shape along lines of race and ethnicity, with British, Anglo-Indian, western Bengalis, eastern migrants, and Muslims gradually fielding segregated teams supported by segregated groups of fans. For Bengalis, the politics of football were closely tied to the British accusation of effeminacy: to play the game was to assert manhood and regeneration. At the turn of the century, the Hindu reformist ideologue and

educator Vivekananda had declared football to be more important than the Bhagavad Gita in the education of boys. Even if the story is apocryphal, the significance attached to it by contemporaries – and the importance attached to football by Vivekananda's monks at the Ramakrishna Mission schools, where middle-class boys were subjected to a modern, Indian-nationalist pedagogy – backed up the association of football with organization and militant nationhood.

The most famous instance of this militancy came in 1911, when Mohun Bagan – a Calcutta club supported by western Bengalis – entered the finals of the IFA (Indian Football Association) Shield tournament, which was India's premier football championship. Their opponents were the all-white East Yorkshire Regiment, which had a formidable reputation not just as footballers but as tough soldiers. Mohun Bagan won, setting off raucous celebrations not just among its usual support base but among Indians around Bengal. It was as if a particular club had become the team of the larger nation, against an adversary that was undeniably an arm of the colonial regime, and as such, a team in the competitions of empire and race. Particular details of the match, such as the fact that the Indians had played in bare feet and the Yorkshiremen in boots, received much attention: this was martyred flesh heroically defeating the materials of power, or the downtrodden overcoming the soles of the oppressor's shoes. It coincided perfectly with the agitation against the British decision to partition Bengal, and with the reversal of that decision in 1911.

Club football remained massively popular in Calcutta and its hinterland after Indian independence, although it did not remain unchanged. The clubs became desegregated; Mohammedan Sporting, for instance, has long had more Hindu players than Muslims, and East Bengal is not limited to migrants from the east. The same player can expect to change clubs multiple times in the course of his career. Fans retained their loyalties more out of habit than

from attachment to a particular geography or ethnicity. Also, as the popular base of football in Bengal deepened and widened, and the clubs transitioned from amateurism to contracted salaries, the sport became an established mechanism of aspiration and socio-economic achievement for young men from poorer backgrounds. The clubs did not pay their players extravagantly, but they nevertheless produced a modern structure of professional sport that surpassed anything that emerged with hockey or even cricket. By the 1980s, foreign players from elsewhere in the developing world (Iranians and Nigerians, in particular) were playing for Calcutta-based clubs.

The professionalization of Indian football, however, came with dwindling interest in the idea that a football team could represent the nation. In the 1950s, the Indian national team was still internationally credible (although not a top competitor), especially in the Asian circuit. Soon afterwards, its lack of success on any international stage made it unviable as a carrier of national prestige, and Indian club football became almost entirely insular: a world of its own, in which fans waxed lyrical about star players while ignoring their mediocrity in a wider world. The failure at the international level was due, to some extent, to problems that were also encountered in hockey: lack of organization outside specific regions, difficulties with adapting to technology and new styles of play, inadequacies in professional coaching, and the inadequate physical fitness of subaltern players in a sport that had sharply raised its demands on the body of the athlete.

It is not that Indian football fans were oblivious of a world outside Calcutta (or Goa, where enthusiasm for football also ran high, not least because the history of the old Portuguese colony did not include competition from cricket). They followed the World Cup championships, knew who the international greats were, and developed a particular affection for Brazil and Pele. Brazil was, in a sense, their alternative national team in the absence of Indian competence: dark-skinned, Third World, exuberant, triumphant. But in the decades when Indian television was in

its infancy, they rarely saw international football. Even their own football, which they could see at the stadium, was more often an aural and textual phenomenon, heard on the radio and read about in the newspapers. They had a glimpse of Pele in 1977 when the New York club Cosmos visited Calcutta and played an exhibition game against Mohun Bagan, but the blow was soft: Mohun Bagan managed to draw the match 2-2, which pleased the home crowd. They were thrilled to share a moment in the sun, but not shocked or embarrassed by a naked reminder of their inferiority.

In the 1980s, however, the eye could no longer be averted. In the decade when television became commonplace in India, Indian football fans were exposed to the highest levels of the global game, beginning with the 1982 World Cup tournament. With the coming of satellite and cable television, the field of vision came to include major championships, year around, everywhere in the world. At that point, the poor quality of Indian football could not be ignored, and Calcutta's notorious "football fever" cooled very discernibly. Crowds thinned for club matches, and the notion of an Indian football star became infused with wryness. Some attempts were made to remedy the defects, and certainly, from the 1990s onwards, the liberalization of the Indian economy – and the emergence of a powerful advertising and media industry – generated funds which might have been used to improve the standard of the game. For the most part, these efforts have not worked. Foreign coaches, practice games with B-level and C-level foreign club teams, sending a few players to participate in the English football circuit, and attempts to organize a new, television-sponsor-friendly championship on the basis of city identity have not fundamentally changed the reality of a national team that is a national embarrassment. The gap between results and reasonable expectations has become so wide and entrenched that nobody believes it can be closed. The original purpose of Indian football has, thus, been substantially abdicated, unable to survive the shifts in the economy of the sport, and unable, also, to compete with cricket, where the trajectories of success and popularity have been very different.

The Exception of Cricket

Cricket is the great exception of Indian sport. It came from the same colonial roots as hockey and football, in the sense that it was a part of the Victorian pedagogy of discipline and “team spirit” that Indians were both challenged to imbibe and presumed to be racially incapable of absorbing. It too was appropriated initially by limited numbers of Indians: the players came from the higher echelons of native society, although the spectators – who often played too, with different codes of play – represented a wider slice of the people. But whereas hockey and football proved to be limited in their ideological, affective and economic potential, cricket became the Indian national sport, eclipsing all other games to the extent that non-Indians are sometimes surprised to learn that Indians play anything else. Unlike the permanent backwaters of football and hockey, cricket surpassed the wildest expectations of Indian nationalists who saw modern sport as the means of achieving power, influence and centrality.

Indian cricket in the last three decades of the nineteenth century was unquestionably a marginal affair: played by the Parsis of western India and then by the princes, and met with various degrees of grudging British acceptance and condescension. Bombay was the cradle of the sport in India, because of support that was finally extended by the provincial government in the 1890s. The patronage of the princes took the game beyond Bombay. By the first decade of the twentieth century, the first regular Indian cricket tournament had taken shape: the Triangular, in which three ethnically constituted “communities” – Parsis, Europeans and Hindus – each fielded a team. Muslims joined in 1912, making the tournament the Quadrangular, and a fifth team (the Rest) was added in 1937 to what was finally the Pentangular.

Any expectations that colonial administrators or the Anglo-Indian community may have had that the tournament would enshrine a stable European domination of the field dissipated very soon; the non-white teams showed themselves quite capable of holding their own. In its structure, however, the tournament reaffirmed the colonial doctrine of India as a collective of competing ethno-racial groups under British supervision. It was, in that sense, contrary to the nationalist discourse officially espoused by the Congress, which emphasized a unitary nationhood. Gandhi was explicit in his disapproval of the “communal” basis of the Quadrangular contest. If, however, we allow that Indian nationalism has never been entirely distinct from the assertion of communal identities, the Quadrangular was not aberrant. Neither the crowds nor the players were consistently polarized, and there was no significant threat of violent confrontation at the matches. It was understood that the contests were taking place within a limited context that did not exclude other affiliations. A Hindu and a Muslim, representing “the Hindus” and “the Mohammedans” in the tournament, could be teammates in another context, cricketing or otherwise. The Quadrangular/Pentangular can, in fact, be regarded as a successful example of Indians appropriating a colonial structure of competition and using it to gatecrash a closed space of empire. There can be little doubt that the exposure, experience and organization provided by the Quadrangular facilitated the elevation of India to “Test” status – i.e., admission into the top tier of nationally representative cricket teams, which then consisted of England, Australia, South Africa, the West Indies and New Zealand – in 1932. As in the Olympics, sporting nationhood came before the political nation was fully in sight.

Test status was, nevertheless, more an incremental change than a revolution. In the 1930s, it did not mean very many international contests; the hierarchy within the group of Test-playing sides meant that lowly dark-skinned newcomers got fewer games. The Quadrangular remained the primary domestic structure, and the older elites of Indian cricket – the princes in particular –

retained considerable influence over the national team, which, consequently, could be described as a group of patrons and clients as much as it could be described as “national.” Over the next decade and a half, however, the princes lost their influence. Middle-class players – who chafed at the self-importance of the princes, especially when the latter displayed little ability but insisted on command – asserted themselves and showed themselves to be indispensable to a competitive national team. The fading away of the British and the princes as political forces after 1947 reinforced the shift. By 1948, when India resumed Test cricket after the interruption imposed by the world war, the national team was firmly in the hands of the urban middle class.

Test Cricket and Nehruvian India

A princely residue remained. It resurfaced prominently in the 1960s in the form of the Nawab of Pataudi, who became a popular and relatively successful captain. Mirroring the place of the princes in independent India, however, Pataudi’s appeal was based more on nostalgia than on the authority of his class. It was also based on peculiar factors like the fact that as a one-eyed man whose most famous performance came on one good leg, Pataudi could be swashbuckling as a buccaneer, especially in a cricketing world in which authority was hoarded by an Anglo-Australian elite. He was, of course, also an insider in the aristocracy: a prince, the son of a former India and England player, and former captain of the Oxford University side. But within India, he carried the aspirations of a middle class that was in command of its own country but conscious of its weakness in the world. It is not coincidental that Pataudi’s place in Indian cricket came to an end just as Mrs. Indira Gandhi abolished the Privy Purses, or extravagant pensions, that had sustained what remained of princely glamor in India.

Indian cricket in the period between the 1950s and the 1980s was both an extensive and a limited phenomenon. Very large numbers of people followed and played the game. Matches in domestic tournaments (particularly the interstate Ranji Trophy and interzonal Duleep Trophy, which replaced the Pentangular after independence) were often well-attended, and Test matches routinely sold out stadiums seating up to eighty thousand spectators. Live commentary of Test matches on All-India Radio took the game into millions of homes, and small crowds of people gathered over transistor radios at bus stops and tea stalls, listening to games they could not attend in person, became a common sight. Cricket in this form was, among other things, a ritual of consuming technology, within the modest means of the middle class in a “socialist” economy. Radio was particularly important in popularizing cricket among women, who had been peripheral to the sport before the 1950s. For children, and boys in particular, the national team provided icons with an overarching appeal: no matter where in the country you lived, you were fixated upon the same dozen or so players, although you might be especially fond of those from your home state. The rituals of neighborhood cricket, played on any available patch of open space, were the same in any Indian city or town. In that sense, cricket reinforced a uniform and popular Indianness, accommodating and balancing regional affiliations.

As part of that national consciousness, cricket connected its Indian followers to a world of sport and competition: they learned the names of Caribbean players, the peculiarities of stadiums in Australia, and the subtleties of English “playing conditions” (weather and soil). They acquired that cosmopolitan knowledge through an Indian lens, as Indian fans. In the same spirit, cricket became an instrument of Indian foreign policy: India was the first country to push for a boycott of apartheid South Africa, as part of its wider stance in the world of decolonization, the Cold War and Non-Alignment. It was vindicated when other countries joined the boycott in the early 1970s, and it was against India that South Africa played its first international cricket when apartheid ended and the boycott was called off.

Cricket, however, also reflected the limits of the Indian nation. There were obvious economic limits, which were also the limits of leisure. Even transistor radios and cheap seats at the stadium were not within the reach of all Indians. People whose meager earnings depended on how long they worked could not afford to take a day, let alone five days, off to watch cricket. (The other side of that coin is the likelihood that high unemployment left young men with time to follow Test matches.) Moreover, in the 1950s, patronage of the sport passed from the princes (who had maintained stables of cricketers), and was taken up by the government and private-sector companies which gave first-class (national and regional level) cricketers jobs and regular salaries. This provided players with the security to pursue the sport on a full-time basis, but the money was modest and nobody became rich playing cricket.

Then there were what might be called city limits. The constituency of the game remained urban and middle class, and its growth followed the growth of that demographic in Indian society. For a long time, Test cricket was played in only a handful of urban centers (Bombay, Calcutta, Delhi, Madras, Bangalore, Hyderabad, Kanpur). Efforts to increase the list of venues (adding Chandigarh and Nagpur, for instance) were not entirely successful. Test cricket marked, in that way, not only a line between the city and the village, but a line between cosmopolitan and provincial cities, the center and the backwater. Until recently, players who made it to the national team came overwhelmingly from the bigger cities and the middle class. So did the women who became cricket fans. The women's game remained severely underdeveloped, with little encouragement or organization. It is not that people in the mofussil town, village and urban slum did not play cricket, or that girls ignored the game. (Many middle-class Indian girls have played with their brothers. But whereas boys could continue to play the game in a reasonably structured way, few girls were given to understand that the game was compatible with female adulthood.) Their versions, however, remained improvised, irregular and self-contained: akin to Jerry

Leach's famous narrative of Trobriand cricket, in which Pacific islanders play their peculiar form of the game.

Results displayed a similar picture of limited success. In Test cricket, Indian defeats far outnumbered victories, and the occasional triumphs typically came in home games, with their familiar playing conditions and friendly crowds. A team capable of winning abroad seemed to take shape only in the 1970s and 1980s. Why this is so remains a difficult question to answer. One can point to the exceptional quality of a batsman like Sunil Gavaskar or a bowler like Kapil Dev, emerging at opposite ends of the 1970s. But even in the 1950s and 1960s, India had much-admired batsmen like Vijay Hazare and bowlers like E.A.S. Prasanna, B.S. Chandrasekhar and Bishan Bedi. While a psychological explanation (the supposedly greater self-belief of the 1970s generation) have sometimes been called upon to explain the difference in results, the simplest explanation is that the results were not especially different. Apart from a couple of spectacular victories in 1971 and 1986, overseas wins remained very rare. India won the World Cup in 1983, but this was in one-day cricket, where weaker teams and modestly-skilled players have a better chance of success. Test cricket remained a different proposition. Exceptional players were all too exceptional, in the sense that their team-mates were mediocre; they were also not exceptional enough, in the sense that the opposition was even better. The Indian pool of talent and resources was too limited. Even middle-class Indian boys, for instance, lacked access to equipment, practice facilities and coaching that Australian and English players could take for granted. Players from poorer backgrounds lacked all those things, plus a few others: proper nutrition, access to schools and tournaments, time to play. Indian successes were victories against the circumstances, sustained in part by the small size of the world of international cricket, in which even mediocre teams had a place.

The two levels of Indian cricket in this period – the organized, urban-middle-class level, with its coaching, tournaments and demarcated pathways of upward mobility, and the unorganized, improvised level of subaltern cricket – were not entirely discrete. Middle-class schoolboys also played neighborhood cricket, often alongside boys from the slums. They switched codes as they switched contexts. And certainly, the stadium itself was a space where the classes and codes came together in semi-segregated fashion: separated by differently priced stands, but immersed in a common crowd and a shared ritual of watching the same game. The men in the cheap seats (there would be few women here) were more given to shouted comments and crude jokes than the middle-class fans, and, quite rarely, willing to riot, although it should be noted that these incidents were usually not about the outcome of the match. (Stadium riots typically stemmed from the poor conditions and indignities that spectators in the cheap stands were asked to put up with.) But they also showed a sophisticated appreciation of the subtleties of Test cricket, which – reflecting its pastoral Victorian origins – could be a slow game, requiring patience from both players and spectators. They knew the esoteric terminology. They relished Indian successes, but they also admired and applauded opponents, and knew what was “not cricket.” They dressed within their means but did not come in rags. When the proletariat went to the stadium or clustered around the radio on the street, they too switched codes, or, as in the Caribbean of C.L.R. James, accepted the hegemony of a particular notion of civilization.

The World of Liberalization

Like almost every aspect of public life in India, this rather stodgy edifice of sporting respectability was shaken to the core by the economic changes of the 1990s, generally described as liberalization: the abandonment of the rhetoric of socialism and centralized regulation, the new openness to foreign investment capital, and, most importantly, the unleashing of an ethos of unapologetic entrepreneurship, self-enrichment and consumerism. It brought to Indian cricket not

only a flood of money, transforming the game into a major generator of revenue, it sharply expanded the pool of players and spectators, bringing in people who were indifferent to the codes and expectations that the previous generation had lived by. In this period, Indian cricket has become an undisputed global power, and also confronted an existential crisis.

Indian cricket in the 1990s was marked most dramatically by the twin phenomena of corruption and Sachin Tendulkar. The decade saw a series of scandals: senior players were implicated in, or at least accused of, financial and sporting improprieties. These included tax evasion and “match fixing,” i.e., cooperating with bookies to fix the outcome of a match (or a smaller part of a match, in what is called “spot fixing”). As allegations flew and secret recordings emerged, the spectacle of corruption itself became a commodity, consumed in the new commercial media. In this hothouse of money and scandal, Tendulkar emerged as a young batting prodigy. His undeniable greatness on the field was matched by his enormous appeal to advertisers, and by his apparently impeccable propriety. Unlike older players with their suddenly-acquired Rolex watches and bookie friends, Tendulkar set a new standard of circumspection: his every move was calculated to be scandal-proof, and every word as bland and insubstantial as a public-relations statement. The circumspection itself was marketed by his managers and admirers in the media as part of his image: he was, it was often said, very protective of his privacy. That new concept of privacy went beyond middle-class modesty: it was inseparable from Tendulkar’s astonishing earnings. (A rough estimate, in the early 2000s, would be five million US dollars annually.) Those earnings no longer came from a token job at a government bureaucracy or a textile company; they came from corporate sponsorship. Cricketers advertising products were not new in India, but the scale and scope of the such activity in the 1990s was. Tendulkar thus epitomized the consolidation of a new, sophisticated relationship between cricket and acceptable wealth, legitimizing the acquisitiveness and aspirations of the middle class in a time when there was, apparently, no longer a contradiction between private aggrandizement and the collective pleasures of nationhood.

Beginning early in the new millennium, the Indian national team began to win abroad with a frequency that was quite unprecedented. Its performances in home series also reached new heights, and a perpetual underdog of Test cricket suddenly became recognized as one of the top teams in the world. The reasons for this change of circumstances are not all centered on India. The West Indies, for instance, sank in this period from overwhelming dominance to shocking mediocrity, making life easier for rivals. But the primary reasons are rooted in home soil. The BCCI, or the board that ran Indian cricket, had become very rich from television revenues. It now eclipsed the Australian and English boards in terms of income, and was the preeminent financial power in the sport. The new wealth allowed it to invest in the infrastructure, personnel and methods of modern professional sport: the training facilities, coaches, dieticians and specialists in fitness and sports medicine that Indian hockey and football could never afford. Simultaneously, the expansion of the middle class threw up an abundance of talent. Tendulkar was not a lone star; he was part of a formidable batting line-up. Fast bowling had long the major weakness and embarrassment of Indian cricket; now the country seemed to be full of young men who could bowl at respectable speeds.

In this rather euphoric moment, however, there were already signs of trouble, some overt and others that were not immediately recognized. The development (initially in England) of T20, a very short version of the game that is essentially cricket reduced to highlights, was seen by Indian media entrepreneurs as a money-making opportunity. They perceived, quite reasonably, that a game that lasted three hours and ended in a guaranteed result was better suited to modern urban life than a five-day game that could end in a draw. With the support of retired cricketers like Kapil Dev, they organized a T20 league, the Indian Cricket League (ICL), that offered attractive remuneration to regional, national and even international players. The BCCI, unwilling to tolerate the challenge to its monopoly on players and revenues, cracked down very hard on the

ICL, using its financial clout in world cricket to ban participating players from all international competition. The ICL collapsed. The BCCI promptly created its own T20 competition, the Indian Premier League (IPL), in which privately owned teams were associated with particular Indian cities. The IPL offered extremely lucrative contracts to Indian and overseas cricketers, muscled in on the international cricket calendar, and became a television phenomenon.

The IPL was in many ways the perfect symptom of the Indian version of globalized capitalism, and of the “gold-rush economy” of liberalization. It took its cues wherever it could find them, but preferred American and Indian cultural material: the floodlit cricket was accompanied by imported white cheerleaders in skimpy clothes, Bollywood music and personalities (who played a dual role as owners and mascots of the new teams), and fireworks. Players were publicly “auctioned.” The pavilion, from which players descended like gods when it was their turn to bat, was replaced by the “dugout” from which well-paid Troglodytes emerged. All-India Radio and Doordarshan commentators, now hopelessly dull, made way for exuberant announcers, “journalists” and ex-cricketers paid to endorse the spectacle in hyperbolic terms. BCCI board members themselves owned IPL teams, effectively giving themselves the right to regulate their own profit-making, and drafting bylaws that denied any conflict of interest between private ownership of IPL teams, management of the national game, and the allocation of television revenues. Politicians became visibly close to the IPL, supporting their protégés among the managers of the game, and it remained unclear whether they were curbing or facilitating the irregularities of the cricket board. Board members who were team-owners also had their protégés: N. Srinivasan, the powerful and tenacious president of the BCCI, also owned the Chennai Super Kings IPL team; M.S. Dhoni, the captain of that team, was also the captain of the Indian national team and the highest-paid cricketer in the world. The BCCI’s attorneys increasingly took the position that the board was not a national entity at all, but a private organization. Given the history of Indian cricket, this amounted to a startling repudiation of the national focus of the sport, and an admission of the naturalized nexus between corporations,

politicians, sports bureaucrats and celebrity athletes. It was a logical culmination of the new privacy that had been heralded by the Tendulkar phenomenon in the previous decade.

Such naked robber-baron capitalism in cricket was not sustainable for very long. Lalit Modi, the architect of the IPL, soon found himself accused of financial impropriety and fled the country. After a series of lawsuits, new match-fixing scandals and the intervention of the Indian Supreme Court, some separation was instituted between team ownership and the BCCI, glaring conflicts of interest were mitigated, and the worst offenders – in particular Srinivasan – were weakened. The public's fascination with the money-making on display was tempered by a discernible revulsion at the corruption and greed, especially as the novelty of cheerleaders and Bollywood stars at cricket matches wore off.

The efforts to clean up the IPL could not, however, hide the crisis in Test cricket in India. Attendance at Test matches plummeted after the 1990s; crowds made it clear that they preferred the “entertainment package” of T20 to the arcane pleasures of the longer game. It could be said of them that they were not serious cricket fans, but the idea of being “serious” about entertainment, or the adult equivalent of “play,” was alien to them. The phenomenon was not exclusively Indian: it affected every cricket-playing country outside the old, white circle of England, Australia, New Zealand and a portion of South Africa. Within India, only some cities – Bangalore, Chennai, Calcutta and Bombay – still saw full stadiums for Test matches.

The pattern was clear: Test cricket hung on in the older centers of the sport, and was dying in the peripheries of the nation, the city and the stadium, where economic liberalization had transformed the relationship between consumption and respectability. These peripheries were

made up not only of old cricket fans who had revised their ideas about pleasure and leisure, but also of new fans whose expectations were different to begin with. These fans were not subalterns in the economic sense; the poor were never a part of the marketplace of cricket in the IPL era. They were, however, newly moneyed and brashly confident. Defying C.L.R. James, the new crowd showed no interest in the pedagogy of the stadium or the hegemony of elites who insisted upon a “straight bat.” They did not applaud opponents who played well or won; they were not liberals. They were not invested in the nostalgia and history – the essentially Victorian and Nehruvian modernity – that Test cricket prioritized. Short-format cricket was instant and disposable gratification: a sport akin to basketball, in that it did not call upon the fan to learn and remember legends, scoreboards and plays over periods of decades.

The crisis of the old fan base was evident on the field as well. The string of Test match victories in the early and mid-2000s was followed by a succession of heavy defeats, especially in away games. Test cricket survived in India, but as a sickly and barely tolerated cousin of the boisterous new sporting Self. It came to be expected that India would lose abroad, and that the losses would be compensated for in international rankings by home series and blatant manipulation of the playing conditions. When the great Indian players who had come of age in the 1990s retired from the sport, they were not replaced by players of a comparable level of skill, even though the pool of talent was larger. Test cricket and T20 call for different techniques. Because the money was in T20, the new generation of cricketers had geared themselves to play the short format and were found lacking in the skills of the longer, more demanding version of the game. To some extent, this was a global phenomenon, but it was particularly pronounced in India, where the economic earthquake had exposed the demographic limits of “traditional” cricket: an insufficient number of Indians had been taught to value that game.

Ironically, thus, the same forces that put Indian cricket at the peak of the global game pulled it down almost immediately, shifting the globe in the process. The structure of patronage expanded, allowing better performances and results, but it demanded a different game. In England and Australia, the Indian enthusiasm for T20 was regarded as an upstart effrontery and, indeed, as childish. But while English and Australian sportswriters and cricket administrators sought to cling to their old position as the arbiters of values and beauty in sport, it was clear that in terms of the power to allocate resources, make policy and persuade the greatest number of people, they were now the periphery. With the wealth generated by a massive new market, Indian cricket was the new global center, sucking foreign players into IPL teams and bullying other national cricket boards (to their alarm, resentment and acquiescence). The values of the sport had changed, and aesthetics rearticulated as marketable kitsch. The thrill of national victory now came not so much from winning on the field at the most challenging level of the game, as from the awareness of Indian power in the financial and administrative world of cricket.

Nearly Was and Almost Rans – Tennis, “TT” and Badminton

In its abbreviated, Americanized and ultra-monetized form, cricket remained the gorilla on the Indian playing field. Hopes that some of the largesse would be shared with other, neglected, sports came to nothing. The enlargement of the middle class did provide a boost to tennis. India had a modest history of competitive tennis, going back to the mid-twentieth century. Ramanathan Krishnan won the Wimbledon boys’ title in 1954, and reached the men’s semi-finals in 1960 and 1961; he was the fourth-seeded player at Wimbledon in 1962. His son Ramesh also won the junior titles at Wimbledon and the French Open, both in 1979. The Amritraj brothers (Vijay and Anand) had some success in the international men’s circuit and the Davis Cup in the 1970s and 1980s. Economic liberalization generated a larger pool of players (who came entirely from the urban middle class), greater resources for training, and more attractive financial rewards. Just as

importantly, it produced the media environment in which Indians could compete internationally before Indian crowds. The first beneficiaries of the changed circumstances were Leander Paes and Mahesh Bhupathi, who became a formidable doubles team, regularly winning international championships. Whereas Vijay Amritraj had an eternally hopeful following among a thin sliver of Indians who read the English-language newspapers, Paes and Bhupathi were widely admired: their frequent victories, strutting assertiveness and income seemed to embody the formula of success in the 1990s. In the new millennium, Sania Mirza took that formula further, becoming the first Indian tennis celebrity. Her good looks, dress sense and insouciance made her perfect material for the tabloid media, which had eclipsed and infected the stolid newspapers and television programming of the past. Her accomplishments on the tennis court became secondary to gossip about her love life, and her decision to marry a Pakistani cricketer only highlighted her reputation for living glamorously on the margins of respectability, like a slightly scandalous Bollywood starlet.

Leander Paes, Mahesh Bhupathi and Sania Mirza were players of modest ability. None broke into the top twenty of international singles rankings, although Mirza came close at one point in her career. They all became specialist doubles players, sometimes teaming up with retired singles greats like Martina Navratilova and Martina Hingis. Their Indian fans did not begrudge them these shortcomings and dodges. Many fans were simply unaware that doubles competition is a lesser form of tennis (much as T20 is a lesser form of cricket), requiring a lower level of skill. They did not themselves play tennis; most had never been coached or held a racquet. That is precisely why the standard of tennis remained low in India: very few played or had access to the infrastructure, even in the era of liberalization. What had grown was a base of armchair fans, who were attracted to victory, celebrity, television entertainment and the vicarious experience of money. In that regard, Indian tennis resembled Formula One auto racing, which acquired a following among affluent Indians in the 2000s. These fans declared themselves to be supporters of the revealingly named Force India, which was privately owned by a wealthy Indian (Vijay

Mallya, who has also fled the country to escape prosecution for financial crimes), but staffed entirely by non-Indians. It also resembled T20 cricket, although cricket was a game that its fans actually played.

A somewhat different situation is discernible in badminton and table tennis. Unlike tennis (not to mention auto racing), both these sports are widely played by middle class Indians, recreationally and semi-competitively. Coaching – mainly non-professional – is sometimes available, at least sporadically. As in tennis, however, there is considerable participation by women; these are considered appropriate sports for middle-class girls, possibly because they are less “rough and tumble” than field sports, to say nothing of wrestling. The standard of play in table tennis has rarely been world-class, although some players did gain a modest level of recognition. Indu Puri was national champion in the women’s game for many years in the 1970s and 1980s, but never ranked among the top fifty in the world. Badminton, which middle-class Indians carried over from colonial traditions of leisure, was played both as gentle backyard recreation for sari-clad women and more energetically in schools, neighborhood clubs and gymnasiums. It produced a bona fide world champion in Prakash Padukone in 1980: he was, briefly, the number one player in the world. Currently, Saina Nehwal is almost as good, relative to her global peers, as Padukone was in his milieu. Nehwal is by any standard a magnificent athlete and a successful one, well known to the middle-class constituency of Indian sport. She and P.V. Sindhu have both won Olympic medals recently. For all that, neither woman has Sania Mirza’s celebrity status, and badminton is not a glamor sport. Few Indians have any awareness of Nehwal’s particular international opponents, or of badminton as an international game. (By contrast, Prakash Padukone's international peers, such as the Indonesian greats Liem Swie King and Rudy Hartono, were known to Indians who followed badminton. Today, Indians who cheer for Nehwal or Sindhu follow victory, not the sport.) It remains a homely sport, and Nehwal the archetypal girl-next-door, when sporting celebrity in India is, more than ever, conveyed by the appearance of power in the world.

Conclusion

The concept of sport in India has historically emphasized the organization of play as an aspect and a sign of education. Moreover, it was (and remains) also an aspect and a sign of nationhood: the pursuit of national teams, or compact collectives that might summarize and represent the larger collective. Not surprisingly, the visible limits of sporting success in India reflect other visible limits of a nationhood that, in its modern posture, has attempted to ignore the basic requisites of a modern public, especially in education and health. The Indian contingent that returns empty-handed from the Olympics is, in that sense, the embarrassing companion of the extreme poverty, illiteracy and malnutrition that many ex-colonial nation-states have overcome, but that the Indian middle class has learned not to see. It is not that Indian parents insist that their children study rather than play sports, an explanation that is trotted out every four years, after Indian athletes have again underperformed at the Olympics. It is that not enough Indians go to school. The Indian nationalist assumption has generally been that even a limited nation will be globally competitive because of its sheer numbers. The reality is that because the national public and the national population have remained partially distinct, the success of the former has been disrupted by the unaddressed problems of the latter.

Teams and crowds are inherently public, and inseparable from the coalescence of a national public. Historically, “private” activities did not fit easily into this ideology of leisure with a collective political purpose. The sports that were relatively successful became so only when they effectively mobilized nationhood for a competitive but inclusive world: that, indeed, was the meaning of success. This limited nation was rarely strong enough to remain competitive. Only cricket has fully managed the magic trick of sport in modern India: it is widely played by Indians

in India, successfully played by Indians at the global level, and is organized to represent the nation in the world.

That “magical” success has been reinforced but also reconstituted by the transformed relationship between nationhood and the public in India. Until quite recently, the codes of competition that people who regarded themselves as Indian and sporting were, by and large, determined with reference to a wider world of sport: taking on “the world” at its “own games.” Because the public that played such games in India was not very large, and the state it controlled not very strong in resources and organization, results measured in terms of national achievements or victories remained modest. What developed was a somewhat limited and insulated sporting society that was nevertheless determined to view itself as a player in the world: not unlike Nehruvian India generally.

When the insularity and limitedness were exploded by market forces, the sporting nation could not and did not remain the same. It became wider and deeper, linked at one end to a multinational world of name-brands, celebrities and capital, and at the other end to consumers who had hitherto been marginal to the work (which was also the leisure) of representing the nation in the world. For the new crowd that took over the spaces in which the middle-class understanding of nationhood is displayed, competing with the world on “universal” terms (which were, of course, not so much universal as hegemonic) was less relevant than the narcissistic vision of itself on television. That infatuation diluted and altered the meanings of “serious” sport, infusing it with the “childish,” entertainment-oriented, business of playing, which – unlike sport – had no automatic political significance.

Yet politics is more significant than ever in the relationship between Indians and their sports in the era of tabloid news. As the sporting nation has been redefined to accommodate play, privacy has itself been revised to make room for the material rewards of representing the nation, which can effectively be privately owned but publicly displayed. The sporting nation now consumes, is consumed, and is a private sanctuary for consumption. This indicates, indeed, the development of multiple levels of play. Liberalized Indians (who should not be confused with liberal Indians, a dying breed) “play” before a national public – playing both a sport and a role, like those of Sachin Tendulkar and Sania Mirza, or a random woman who sees herself on the giant screen in the stadium – to acquire the wealth that allows them to retreat from the public eye and play privately.

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The Indian Nation and Kashmir



There is nothing especially surprising about the actions of the Indian state in Kashmir over the past few weeks. Faced with public protests in the valley after the killing of the Hizbul

Mujahedeen “terrorist” Burhan Wani, Indian security forces have used force, killing about fifty civilians, injuring scores with twelve-gauge shotguns euphemistically called “pellet guns” (blinding several in the process), and brutally beating others. Little of this is new, in Kashmir or elsewhere in India, where lethal force is commonly used for crowd control and police violence against the weaker sections of the population – the poor, Dalits, Muslims, women, tribal people, homosexuals – is routine. This is part and parcel of illiberal democracy, in which colonial mechanisms of coercion have been substantially carried over into a republic premised on rights, because (as those with rights understand) not everybody understands rights, and because rights must accommodate entrenched social hierarchies.

What is remarkable, however, is the ubiquitous legitimization on Indian public forums of the state’s assault on Kashmiris. Legitimacy is typically not a relevant factor in the public’s reaction to state violence in India. Police brutality and “crowd firing” are unpleasant facts of life, like crippled children and dirty public toilets: one deals with them by not seeing them, which is not difficult because they usually happen to other people. Yet here we are in Kashmir, or rather in Delhi, Calcutta and Bangalore looking at Kashmir, bending over backwards to justify the unspeakable. We would not see such behavior on the part of the state or the citizen in the United Kingdom or Canada, if Scotland or Quebec sought to secede. It is not that Britons and Canadians are not patriotic. But nationalism in South Asia (especially India, Bangladesh, Pakistan and Sri Lanka) has a particular stridency and desperation to it. Where civil society is underdeveloped, the national fetish is exaggerated in compensation. So the Pakistani cricket team publicly thanks the army after winning a Test match, and all conversations with Bangladeshis lead to “amader muktijuddho,” our glorious liberation war. The Indian nationalist posture on Kashmir, however, goes beyond that. The rationales that have been extended to justify the beatings and shootings, home invasions and disappearances, indicate an advanced rot within the ideology of being Indian.

The rhetoric of legitimization is neither simple nor uniform. It forms a cluster of discrete arguments and assumptions which can be deployed alternatively: when one fails, the Indian patriot uses another. They are also semi-disingenuous. The patriot holding out a particular rationale of state violence does not necessarily believe it to be true, but extends it anyway to cover an anxiety or awareness that he or she fears is too crude to articulate. There is the hoary insistence that Kashmir is “an integral part of India,” implying not only that Kashmiri separatists are traitorous and perverse, but also that the Indian response is justified by sovereignty itself: it is our “internal matter,” we will do what we want. There is the equally stale suggestion that the separatists are a small minority and agents of Pakistan, and that most Kashmiris are loyal Indians. There is the “What about the Pandits?” argument, implying that the ethnic cleansing of Kashmir’s Hindu minority makes Indian violence against the Muslim majority just and necessary. In a related vein, there is “What about the POK?”, or the insistence that the Pakistani-controlled part of Kashmir should be freed first. Then there are the arguments that appear to be based in Realpolitik: India apparently has no trustworthy negotiating partner with whom to negotiate a solution, and an independent Kashmir would become a Pakistani proxy, a hub of jihadi terror and a threat to Indian security. Finally, there is the argument of existential anxiety: if Kashmir is allowed to secede, it will set a precedent that will be followed sooner or later by other Indian states, destroying the union.

Few of these arguments are entirely specious, which is why they should be taken seriously rather than dismissed out of hand. It is only then that we can understand their shortcomings and see behind the curtain they represent. The “integral part of India” line sounds a blandly bureaucratic statement by the Ministry of External Affairs. It is true, nonetheless, that Kashmir’s accession to India in 1947 had the support of the National Conference (the main political party in Kashmir), and was validated by the victory of the National Conference in state-level elections in 1950. But

it also disguises the nature of the National Conference's allegiance to India. Isolated by geography, historical education and political realities, the National Conference and its leader Sheikh Abdullah were Kashmiri nationalists, not Indian nationalists. Since their primary adversary, the Dogra ruling family, was a client of the British colonial regime in India, Sheikh Abdullah and Nehru were able to form a partnership. It was not entirely an arrangement of convenience; Sheikh Abdullah did not regard Indians as aliens. His sense of his Indianness was, however, different from that of B.C. Roy or Rajagopalachari. For Sheikh Abdullah, Indian nationhood was confederate, not unitary. Kashmir could be one of many sovereign components. All national histories are inherently fictitious, and Kashmiris had learned to value a different fiction from what Tamils, Maharashtrians and Bengali Hindus had absorbed over the past century.

We tend to forget that in the 1940s, the idea of multiple Indias had adherents of many different ideological stripes, including Jinnah, Benoy Sarkar, Sarat Bose and Shahid Suhrawardy. And however much Indian, Pakistani and Bangladeshi patriots may deny it now, multiple Indias are precisely what emerged in 1947 and 1971. Sheikh Abdullah's outlook on the "Indianness" of Kashmir can be located in this context of acceptable detachment and contingent attachment. When Kashmiri nationalists agreed to join India, they joined as partners, not as an "integral part." A partner can disassociate if the terms of the partnership are no longer satisfactory. By 1953, with Article 370 of the Indian Constitution already rolled back significantly, the terms of Kashmir's membership in the Indian Union satisfied neither Kashmiri nor Indian nationalists. This is true regardless of whether the revisions of Article 370 are justifiable. (By the norms of a unitary nation they are; by those of a confederation they are highly provocative.) The subsequent behavior of the federal government – the dismissal of Sheikh Abdullah's government and his repeated imprisonment, the naked political interference and rigging of elections in the 1980s, and then the brutality of the counterinsurgency – have made the resumption of a partnership extremely difficult, although perhaps it is not impossible. But the "integral part" rhetoric is at

best a mistake, based on a misreading of the original relationship between Kashmiri and Indian nationalisms.

Likewise, the idea that most Kashmiris are “loyal Indians” is not entirely baseless. Many Kashmiris have participated in the Indian state, or at least, some aspects of the Indian state, since 1947. They have voted (in numbers that have fluctuated wildly with the political mood), worked in government offices, and even joined the police. After the demise of the accord which Sheikh Abdullah had reached with Mrs. Indira Gandhi in 1974, and the active sabotage of the state’s election process by the Congress in the 1980s (initiated, ironically, by Mrs. Gandhi herself), that willingness to participate has become even more sporadic. Kashmiris continue to need the state to provide jobs and basic services, much as any occupied population needs the occupying power. Indians before 1947 also cooperated with the colonial regime on an everyday basis, voting in municipal and provincial elections, staffing the government offices and joining the police. Nobody except delusional apologists for the empire would have mistaken that participation for loyalty. No Indian administrator who has spent time in the Valley, now or before the insurgency began, believes the line that most Kashmiris are cheerful citizens. If the Indian government believed otherwise, it would have held a plebiscite in its section of Kashmir and put the question to rest.

The idea that Pakistani control over western Kashmir is equivalent to Indian control over the Valley (or even worse, as many Indian patriots insist) reflects a similar ignorance of the history of the dispute, as well as a willful distortion of present-day realities. In 1947, when the various interested parties (the Congress, the Muslim League, the National Conference, the Dogra monarchy) staked their claims, the National Conference and its Kashmiri-nationalist but pro-India agenda was strong in the Valley but not in the western regions that subsequently came under Pakistani control. The Muslim League and its argument for two nations had greater public

support in the western areas, where there was a substantial Punjabi presence. Thus, in a rather convenient twist of military circumstances, the Pakistani-held portion was relatively pro-Pakistan, whereas the Indian-held Valley was already inclined towards India if the conditions of partnership were met. While there was undoubtedly dissatisfaction with the particulars of Pakistani control in western Kashmir, it never added up to the level of anger that developed in Indian Kashmir, and it did not require similar levels of violence to suppress. “Azad Kashmir” is misleading terminology, but less so than “integral part of India,” and there is no crisis in “Azad Kashmir” that calls for an immediate solution.

If we look at the predicament of the Pandits, we cannot deny that they have suffered: brutalized by representatives of the local majority, ethnically cleansed from their homeland, consigned to refugee camps elsewhere in India. It is reasonable to argue that justice for Kashmiris should include justice for the Pandits as well. But to use the Pandits as an excuse to reject Kashmiri aspirations is neither reasonable nor sustainable. First of all, the expulsion of the Pandits happened in the course of the militancy and the counterinsurgency; it was not a triggering movement for either. Second, the counterinsurgency has not helped the Pandits. Instead of producing the conditions of safety and confidence under which they might return to Kashmir, it has generated only a bizarre plan for segregated settlements under constant Indian military protection. If that plan is implemented, it will only institutionalize the alienation of the Pandits from Kashmiri society, and produce a new political-military problem reminiscent of Jewish settlements in the West Bank. Finally, the narrative of the martyred Pandit ignores the fact that the small minority group was overwhelmingly favored by the Dogra monarchy, and continued to enjoy a very large share of government jobs, contracts and administrative access after 1947. (It can be pointed out that they also occupied the Indian Prime Minister’s chair for about forty years.) Such disproportionate power inevitably generates resentment. Justice for the displaced Pandits can be achieved, if it is not too late, only within the larger framework of justice for

Kashmiris. It will have to come from the Kashmiris (many of whom are sympathetic to the Pandits but not to their patrons); Indian attempts to force it will backfire.

The Realpolitik arguments are no less shaky than those based on misreading the specific history of Kashmir's relationship to India. They collapse the different layers, phases and affiliations of Kashmiri nationalism into a single plot that can be described variously as "terrorist," "jihadi" or "Pakistani." No distinction then remains between a secular Kashmiri-nationalist outfit like the (now almost defunct) JKLF, a religiously-inspired but also Kashmiri-nationalist organization like the Hizbul Mujahadeen (which, unlike other "mujahadeen" such as Al Qaida or ISIS, has no agenda beyond Kashmiri sovereignty), and groups like the Lashkar-e-Toiba and Jaish-e-Mohammed, which are not Kashmiri at all, but transnational jihadi organizations based in Pakistan and controlled (not always effectively) by Pakistani military intelligence. There are also the many political groups, some stridently separatist and others inclined to cooperate with the Indian state, that form the Hurriyat All-Parties Conference or political umbrella of Kashmiri nationalism. The outliers, clearly, are the non-Kashmiri jihadis, who by any reasonable definition of terrorism, are the only "terrorists" in this cluster of factions opposing the status quo. It is only they who have consistently attacked civilian targets, both in Kashmir and in India proper. Their presence and impact in the Valley have been declining for the past fifteen years. (The Pakistani military has partially "turned off the tap," so to speak, under US pressure.)

Yet it is the non-Kashmiri jihadis – and their leaders, like Hafeez Sayeed – that hard-headed Indian observers apparently fear when they say that Kashmir without Indian control would become a terrorist den. The anxiety misses not only the weakness of such groups in the Valley, but also the reality that the Kashmiris themselves tolerated them because they troubled the Indian occupiers. Without an Indian occupation, that tolerance would dry up, and foreign jihadis would have little to do in Kashmir. They would not even have a reason to carry out attacks in India,

which they attack in the name of Kashmir. If they wanted to do so at the bequest of the Pakistani military, they could do it from across the Punjab border.

To assume that “terrorists” would take over Kashmir if there was no Indian occupation underestimates the strength and substance of Kashmiri nationalism. It is a fully-fleshed ideology and infrastructure that goes back to the National Conference in the 1930s and that is represented today in the Hurriyat. There is, in other words, no shortage of negotiating partners for the Indian government whose objectives are as rational, and as irrational, as those of any other nationalist: sovereignty, self-government, independence. There is every likelihood that the Pakistani government will seek to maintain its influence over a sovereign Kashmir, but there is no guarantee that it will succeed. (If such influence could be taken for granted, Bangladesh would be an Indian client state, which it most assuredly is not. The reasons are the same as in Kashmir: Bangladeshis may have welcomed Indian intervention in 1971, but they did not throw off Pakistani control to replace it with Indian overlordship.) On the contrary, any negotiated independence for Kashmir would almost certainly include provisions for limiting or excluding direct Pakistani military control, just as Indian control would be limited or excluded, either through demilitarization or through joint Indo-Pakistani protection of Kashmiri sovereignty. But the primary limit would be Kashmiri nationalism itself.

If the Indian defense of the national posture on Kashmir was based merely on bad history and mistaken assumptions, it would not be so resilient. The resilience comes first and foremost from the emotional power of the nationalist imagination, which, for all its noble protestations of loving one’s “fellow man” (albeit within national limits), is even more basically a narcissistic vision of the self. For Indian nationalists, more than most, that vision has long been tied to an anthropomorphic map – Bharat Mata in her sari, like a bazaar calendar – in which Kashmir forms the head. There is no denying the power of that map; no Indian who grew up with it is

immune to its visceral appeal, which is the appeal of birth and survival itself. That is how Indian nationhood was fleshed out, with Bankim's motherland acquiring the features of Abanindranath Tagore's Mother India and Savarkar's geography of Hindusthan. Within this imagination, "losing" Kashmir amounts to decapitation, or an almost unimaginable mutilation of identity.

The map at the center of that identity is, ironically, a colonial map. It is not an old map. Its basic shape emerged in 1849, when the British completed their conquest of Punjab. It does not coincide with any ancient Indian state, and the concept of Bharat Mata did not exist before the nineteenth century. It is not even a single map, because the original fetish that moved the nationalists of the Swadeshi era was replaced, in 1947, by a relatively slender figure. Then too, outraged nationalists cried "vivisection" and "mutilation" (and blamed the British), but soon became entirely accustomed to the new map, to the extent that they lost nearly all familiarity with the severed "arms" and had no difficulty thinking of them as enemy territory. In the slimmed-down, post-Partition Mother India, Kashmir remains the head, but had Kashmir become a part of Pakistan in 1947, Indians would have adjusted, just as they adjusted to the rest of the "vivisection." The unthinkable prospect of decapitation reflects an inability to see past one's nose of the moment.

The fundamental consequence of that excessive attachment to a recent map is that land, rather than people, has become the substance of Indian nationhood. Keeping one's cartographic head has become essential; the inhabitants might as well be lice. A [recent article](#) on the Internet featured images of the Kargil region and reminded readers that Indian soldiers had died to protect the beautiful landscape. This is popular wisdom and patriotism. There has, in fact, been a significant shift in Indian discourse on this point. For much of the history of the republic, Indian nationalists insisted that Kashmiris were Indians too, even when they protested otherwise. That insistence distinguished the Indian position on Kashmir from the Israeli stance on Palestine:

whereas the Zionists claimed the land but rejected the native inhabitants, India claimed the land as well as the people, preserving a saving grace of sorts. In the virulent rhetoric that has surfaced since the killing of Burhan Wani, however, it has become common, and acceptable, for Indians to suggest that if Kashmiris do not wish to be part of India, they can simply “go to Pakistan,” or even more simply, be killed by the army, leaving the land to Indian tourists, who can, presumably, enjoy the houseboats and mountains without the complicating presence of so many Kashmiris. The latter are desirable only when they agree to be part of the landscape.

We have arrived, thus, at a point where the disconnection of Indian nationhood from the consent of the governed has become both naked and respectable. It is not that nobody can see the similarities with the Pakistani position on Bangladesh in 1971: “integral part of Pakistan,” “most are loyal, only a few troublemakers instigated by a foreign power,” “terrorists,” “traitors,” “anti-national elements,” “Indian incursions.” It is that a map in which the citizen sees his own human image makes it traumatic to attach value to the concept of citizenship, which is a concept of rights invested in a community that has consented to its association with a particular territory, including, most basically, the right to live in that associated territory. The “go to Pakistan” line has typically been used in India to threaten Muslims, who are already enshrined as barely tolerated aliens in the national body. (Indian tolerance ceases to operate when a Muslim complains about intolerance. He or she is immediately shouted down and advised to go to Pakistan.) Now that line is applied to an entire people in its own territory, effectively turning Kashmiris into just Muslims, who – like Muslims in Maharashtra or Uttar Pradesh – may or may not be tolerated on “Indian soil.”

The irrelevance of consent also informs the argument that Kashmiri secession would lead other Indian states to leave the union, destroying the republic. The the principles of the republic, rather than its geography or map, form the leading edge of this narrative. For that reason, there is a

poignancy to it: a faith in liberal democracy, in secular and constitutional government, and in the Nehruvian principle that the independent Indian state would be a force for justice, both within and without India. Nationhood and sovereignty, in this vision, do not simply exist; they need a purpose, which Nehru summarized as the willingness to “wipe every tear from every eye.” This, I think, is the most serious objection to “letting Kashmir go.” It is also, however, fundamentally self-defeating.

The fear of disintegration reflects a lack of confidence in the republic: an anxiety that is woven into Indian nationalism, which has coped by devaluing the republic itself. The anxiety is the whispered belief that the Indian state is inherently the project of a minority that can, at best, maintain a benign coercion as its modality of governance. And indeed, the fear is valid. The nationhood of justice and fundamental rights was only occasionally the dominant ideology of the Indian state. They were compromised from the very outset; the Constitution is not a pristine document of liberal democracy, as even a cursory glance at Article 19 (which deals with freedom of speech) will show. For the middle class, i.e., the national vanguard, the purpose of justice almost immediately became secondary to the purpose of “security,” by which they meant the security of their class and the security of the map they fetishized. They also meant consuming the pornography of security: fighter planes and tanks, tales of military “glory” and exhortations to remember “sacrifices.” As in Pakistan, celebrities (M.S. Dhoni, Sachin Tendulkar, assorted movie stars) were encouraged to associate themselves with the military, and one can hardly read the news without being subjected to the mandatory worship of “bravehearts” (the term borrowed from a Hollywood movie) and “Lest we forget” headlines (borrowed from British sentimentality in the First World War). It might be said that whereas Pakistan is a highly militarized society, middle-class India desperately wants to be one, especially if somebody else can be persuaded to do the fighting. But the embrace of the soldier – not the voter – as the ideal citizen, and the consumption of security, has never meant the security of tribal populations, the poor and religious minorities, let alone the right of Kashmiris to be secure from the agents of security.

Even the middle class now finds itself subjected to the vocabulary, boots and batons of security, as university students, professors, journalists, activists, and critics of the government are immediately labelled “anti-national.” Being for the most part good nationalists, they do not make the connection with Kashmir. But the connection is real: anybody can become an honorary Kashmiri. Nationhood, in which justice is a luxury (in the sense that it is frivolous and also in the sense that it must be purchased privately), and “security” is the vital consideration, becomes pathological if the state must be held together by force, losing even its benign premises.

It does not, however, automatically disintegrate. Whatever its purpose, and whether or not it is experienced as benign, Indian nationalism is a powerful ideology and institution; if it were not so, Kashmir, the states of the Northeast and even Tamil Nadu would all be long gone from the union. But it is not equally strong everywhere, because the various pieces of the map did not come through the same experience of colonial rule and anti-colonial mobilization. There is a core and a periphery, easy enough to identify. Not even Indians are persuaded by the Indianness of the northeast, for instance, in spite of decades of counterinsurgency and AFSPA. The northeast, like Kashmir (or Pakistani Bengal) is a kind of desperate afterthought to the nation-state. In the core, Indian federalism has successfully (although not easily, if one recalls the language crises of the 1950s and '60s) organized and accommodated linguistic diversity within a common nationhood with a shared historical narrative; there is little danger here of disintegration along ethnic lines. That is, indeed, an extraordinary achievement, with few parallels elsewhere in the world. Religious diversity has found no such accommodation. The secession of the only Muslim-majority state in the union, or a part of that state, would be a blow to a particular fantasy of secular India, but it would not necessarily shatter the core. Even without the head, the body would probably survive. If it does not, it does not deserve to, and should not. It is worth preserving, but not at any cost, when somebody else must pay the price.

The poignancy of the fear of disintegration also lies in the fact that the Indian map can, and does, represent a romantic cosmopolitanism: the coming together of Punjabis and Upeewallas, Malayalis and Oriyas, on a shared historical stage. It is the romance of a big country and big identity, and even in the moth-eaten India that emerged from the Partition, Indianness has become progressively bigger. Bengalis in the early twentieth century still imagined living in Delhi or Bombay as a kind of exile; their descendants in the present time are very much at home in Rajasthan, as Marwaris are in Calcutta. “Interstate” marriages, “mixed” children and competence in multiple vernaculars are no longer unusual. This cosmopolitanism is an aspect of justice: a transcendence of provinciality and pettiness, an expansion of one’s sense of home and kinship, of what is normal, what is malleable. There is something humanizing about growing up with the acceptance of difference, and with the understanding that old hierarchies and prejudices must give way to, or at least make room for, new civic and social relationships. It has appealed, historically, both to nationalists of the right (like Savarkar, who wanted a Bengali sister-in-law) and of the left (like Nehru); it appealed also to those who (like Rabindranath Tagore) came to see nationalism as a childish constriction of identity and empathy, but retained their sense of being rooted in a particular land.

There is, however, a critical difference between the cosmopolitanism of the left, and that of the right. It is a wonderfully expansive thing for a Bengali to stand in Karnataka, or in Kashmir for that matter, and feel that he belongs there. It is something else entirely for him to feel that it belongs to him, even when the people who actually live there feel otherwise. There is, in the latter case, no romance of kinship: the *Midnight’s Children* phenomenon of a community that is miraculous not only because it has discovered itself, but also because it has made itself. There is only pathetic insecurity and the nationhood of self-occupation, in which rights and kinship are simultaneously sacrificed to a map and a Mel Gibson movie.

July 28, 2016

The Stanford Rape



The “Stanford rape”, in which a freshman named Brock Turner raped an inebriated and unconscious woman, has become a spectacular layer-cake of contemporary American pathologies. It has given all of us - journalists, politicians, academics, bloggers, “activists” - something to contemplate with outrage. This community of outrage has, I think, taken the form of a mob that has reached a moral and political consensus. The outrage itself, however, contains a number of fractures that are worth a closer look, and that are quite revealing about how we punish and how we constitute ourselves as a public in this country. None of it is remotely edifying.

The rape that Turner committed is the least remarkable part of the spectacle. It is, after all, the spectacle of widely endorsed entitlements - that of the white male, that

of the economically privileged male, and that of the male athlete - rolled into the behavior of an undergraduate. What Turner did is so commonplace, in its pieces if not in its totality, that it is not just his parents (who have tried to defend him, rather stupidly) who share in the culpability. We can find traces of Turner in every small town where adults show up to watch high-school football games and seventeen-year-old boys are heroes of the community. It indicates, among other things, a refusal to grow up: a permanent infatuation with the combination of testosterone, violence and adolescent irresponsibility, and a worshipful identification with the sites of that combination. This is a model of community premised on the carnivorous camaraderie of young males. Females inhabit it as cheerleaders and meat. When this settler-colonial masculinity - the association of the little school on the prairie - is fortified and extended by corporate sponsorship, university scholarships, over-involved alumni-fans and the bros-and-hos dynamic of the frat party, we get the incitement to sexual conquest that produced Brock Turner.

It is tempting, no doubt, to see Turner's parents as enablers, if not instigators, and to turn on them for their angry and defensive response to his punishment. But to dogpile on family members attempting to cope with disaster in the full glare of the media and public opprobrium, and to fault them for not being more concerned with the victim of the crime, is quite bizarre. Parents in that situation will defend their children, no matter how unsustainable the defense. Likewise, public introspection can hardly be expected to be their immediate reaction or priority. They may very well have shared some of the assumptions that Brock Turner exhibited when he forced himself on an unconscious woman, but the entitlement to "twenty minutes of action," even if it is taken literally, is not the obscure disease of a margin of society. We cannot eradicate it without rethinking institutions and a "way of life" in which we are very broadly implicated: campus life, youth culture, team sports, success. Nor can we assume that we, in the community of outrage, are entirely and reliably immune to it.

The sentence imposed on Turner has drawn as much criticism, if not more, than the crime itself. It has been suggested that a non-white or poor defendant would have received more severe punishment, and that Turner - the privileged white boy - got nothing more than a slap on the wrist from a sympathetic white, male judge. That position is indefensible. It is true that a black rapist, or one who was not a successful athlete at an elite university, would probably have received more than the six months in a county jail (three with good behavior) that Turner got. The discrepancy is undeniably appalling, and Turner's sentence *is* scandalous. But the scandal is not what it appears to be. Most of those who have broadcast their outrage at the sentence have overlooked the fact that six (or three) months in jail is not the main substance of Turner's punishment. Those months are, in the main, a gesture of punishment, and a semi-obsolete gesture at that. In a society that fetishizes incarceration, the public reflexively expects to see imprisonment after a conviction. In the process, however, it can overlook the reality that imprisonment in America has been entwined, since the 1990s, not only with the rhetoric of institutional failure (articulated as overcrowding and recidivism) that is as old as the modern prison itself, but also with less theatrical forms of punishment and control. These are not as visually impressive as orange jumpsuits, but they are equally flawed in conception and damaging in execution.

The core of Turner's punishment, as anyone who has been paying attention must realize, is the requirement that he register as a sex offender, and the felony record itself. Taken together, these ensure that he will remain under intrusive police supervision for the rest of his life. He will not be able to live where he wants, he will have to report to the police every time he moves, and he must stay away from certain (and sometimes not so certain) areas. On some days, like Halloween, he may be required to stay indoors and hang a "Beware of Sex Offender" sign on his door. People concerned for their children's safety, or moved by curiosity, will be able to look up his

name and address online, harangue him on the street, and petition his landlord to throw him out. In most states, he will not be able to vote. Various foreign countries will block him from entering their territories. Most importantly, his ability to pursue a profession will be crippled. Every time he applies for a job, he will have to disclose his crime, simultaneously shaming and disqualifying himself. There is no realistic way for him to get off the registry, or to retire his criminal record. This is hardly the lot of a criminal who has escaped punishment. It is the lot of a seventy-year old pariah who is still paying for a crime he committed when he was hardly twenty. Many, if not most, in Turner's position would have preferred a prison sentence that actually ended with "time served."

That, as much as the near-certainty that a black man would have *also* received a stiff prison term in addition to all of the above penalties, is the scandal of Turner's sentence. Like eighteenth-century English juries that displayed a reluctance to convict because they wanted to protect defendants from a savage regime of punishment, the judge in Turner's case appears to have done what he could to mitigate the consequences of the conviction. In doing so, he may have showed his social biases; he certainly showcased an institutional bias that was never in doubt. But he also showed the limits of what elected judges can do to interpret the law. He could not (or at any rate, did not) overturn the conviction, or stop the more or less automatic punishments it carried. Turner's whiteness, money and standing as a Stanford athlete may have saved him some prison time, but his life was over as soon as he was convicted.

Race and class are indeed relevant to Turner's punishment, but in ways that are quite different from what the critics of his sentence have underlined. The various registries and regulations for mandatory and quasi-mandatory sentencing that emerged in the

1990s, and that continue to form a cornerstone of American law-enforcement and punishment, were intended primarily to control urban criminals and “super-predators” (to borrow Hillary Clinton’s racially coded term): to contain, in other words, the poor and colored scum that had not been locked up by the incarcerating zeal of the Reagan-Bush era. They utilized a broad brush, eschewing nuance as a political weakness and an administrative handicap. The sex offender registry, in particular, was notoriously but deliberately promiscuous. It indiscriminately included people who had been caught urinating by the roadside, flashers, molesters of six-year-olds, teachers who had had sex with high school students, sellers of pornography, people with child porn on their computers, rapists who had bludgeoned or maimed their victims, dates who had not taken no for an answer, and, of course, innocent people who had been convicted of such offenses because they looked the part. New York City only recently changed its laws to exempt street urimators from criminal conviction and registration. The lack of intelligent discrimination in offenses and penalties was both a posture (“tough on crime”) on the part of lawmakers and prosecutors, and a calculation intended to take the human element out of judgment and give severe punishment a machine-like certainty. That promise of certainty reassured middle-class whites, who did not anticipate - does anyone ever anticipate? - that they might themselves fall in the path of their machine of judge-proof, defense-attorney-proof, nuance-free security.

The concept of security is itself quite relevant, because the extension of punishment beyond the prison term and into a diffuse and permanent condition is the sign of an epidemic of insecurity and a related willingness to expand the surveillance state. It is inseparable from the ubiquitous video cameras, Homeland Security, the NSA, no-fly lists, and the culture of “If you see something, say something.” Less readily visible are a set of connections that take us back to the American rejection of adulthood in favor of innocence. Mandatory sentencing, laws named after lost children, registries and permanent surveillance all reflected an extraordinary anxiety about the

vulnerability of juveniles. Not only was there an explosive intensification, in precisely this period, of the fear that strangers were out to hurt our children, entire populations - college students in particular - were infantilized by administrators and faculty. This was not necessarily a top-down swaddling; students - especially those who believed they were marginal and oppressed - showed great interest in swaddling themselves. In the process, they and their older well-wishers equipped the state (and a host of state-backed entities) with the intrusive, arbitrary and all-pervasive power of super-parents. Below the imagined layer of protection, there was only fear: the familiar fear of child molesters, rapists, terrorists, blacks, Muslims and immigrants that gives the contemporary state its scope and rationale.

This is not a state that possesses, or is expected by its protégés to possess, the capability for nuance; that has been jettisoned in the quest for safety. It is, therefore, appropriately represented not only by the ultra-violent police, but also by the self-righteous mob baying for blood. The individual members of this mob are quite certain that none of them, or their son, would ever commit a sexual offense or crime of any kind, even though they participate in a society saturated with incitement to precisely such behavior. The mob may have a valid moral point. Indians who demonstrated on the streets of Delhi after the rape and murder of Jyoti Singh Pandey undoubtedly had a moral point. But in demanding the death penalty for rapists without thinking through the problems posed by the death penalty for all of society, to say nothing of their own complicity in chronic forms of “legitimate” and “illegitimate” violence, they were worse than villagers with pitchforks, who at least have no pretensions to liberal citizenship. Much the same can be said for those who seem to think that the American state should sentence a twenty-year-old to a lifetime of social and professional leprosy, and still feel that that is not punishment enough.

The consequences of this mob mentality go well beyond any particular miscarriage of justice. It raises, first of all, an echo of old English juries and the Bloody Code: when the law is an ass, it opens itself to subversion from within the judiciary. Secondly, despite the likelihood that judicial bias provided some minor relief from legal stupidity in Turner's case, the burden of stupid laws and procedures inevitably fall disproportionately upon the socially disadvantaged, who are most likely to be brought to trial, inadequately defended, and convicted. Third, the unrestrained public outrage we are witnessing is fascist and childish. It is childish in its lack of proportion and perspective, and fascist in its bullying quality, in which everybody feels the need to join in pulverizing the captured criminal. It is fascist also in its demand for declarations of self-repudiation and public repentance, which eviscerate the concept of privacy of the soul - even that of the criminal - without which liberal democracy cannot survive. It marks the corruption of the judicial process by a notion of "victim's rights" that exceeds legality itself, introducing emotional readings of statements about how badly the victim felt after being raped. (Is a rape victim likely to feel something other than bad? Would a victim who was not a Stanford student, and not as capable of writing an eloquent statement, be less worthy of attention from Joe Biden, not to mention a national commotion?) When trial and punishment become a spectacle of "feelings," including tearful suffering and confession, and inevitably, the observer's need for spectacular satisfaction, we enter the terrain of witch-burning, which has never been far removed from the American courthouse and prison.

Fascism, it is worth remembering, is not a binary quality that a state either possesses or does not possess. It is a ubiquitous tendency within modernity, utilizing specific histories and cultural resources, that must be identified, confronted and contained in every society and state. A fascism of the left, undergirding a community of fear and vindictiveness, is no less real or obnoxious than a fascism of the right. A man has been convicted of a serious crime, although hardly an extraordinary one. He should be able

to receive a reasonable punishment and then get on with his life, without becoming the scapegoat of a savage civilization.

June 11, 2016

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Muhammad Ali and Celebrity Culture



The death of Muhammad Ali this week once again focused attention on the cultural work of remembering a celebrity. Undoubtedly, if Ali had been a great boxer and nothing more, remembrance would have been less substantial than it was. He was, after all, a man whose heyday preceded the Internet and cable television. What gave the legend of ‘The Greatest’ its substance is Ali’s record of outspoken political activism, especially his opposition to the Vietnam War. Celebrities with pet causes are

not very hard to find in America, but in Ali's case it was not posturing. It was an intelligent, sophisticated stance that connected the racism of Jim Crow with the racism of a murderous foreign policy, and that came with the willingness to make real sacrifices. When he refused to fight in Vietnam, he did not flee to Canada: he stayed and took the punishment, and gave up some of the best years of his athletic career. Dr. King (or Gandhi) could not have asked for more.

It was extraordinary, but simultaneously, it was not so. While it is tempting to regard celebrities - athletes in particular - as freaks, they are products and emblems of their historical moment. Ali was a part of the trajectory of the racial politics of America after the Second World War, following in the wake of Jackie Robinson and Willie Mays. He was more publicly angry than them, and famously less modest, marking a crucial transition of 'mood' within a wider civil rights movement that brought us the Nation of Islam, Malcolm X and the Black Panthers. The shift from tight-lipped forbearance (not deference) to undisguised anger and self-praise in the public sphere coincided with the willingness to connect the dots between racism in America, which obviously involved black Americans, and racism in foreign policy, which in the imperial world was a white man's domain. Many whites who tolerated Martin Luther King's Civil Rights activism recoiled when he began to speak out against the Vietnam War: he had gone beyond the permissible boundaries of the ongoing American conversation about race. But looked at in another way, it reflected a permission that came from blackness itself: a transgression that was enabled, even incited, by a culture - and not just black culture - that had discovered the excitement and moral legitimacy of rebellion but not yet found a sophisticated method of containment. It made for a brief moment when black Americans (and not just athletes) could stand on the international stage and clench their fists like John Carlos and Tommie Smith, provided they were willing to pay a price.

The price paid enhanced, rather than diminished, their status as public figures. The place of public sacrifice to the making of blackness in the Civil Rights era was not immediately evident to white observers. Hannah Arendt, for instance, reacted with outrage to black parents who exposed their children to tear gas and police dogs on the streets of southern cities. It had to be explained to her that the parents were neither callous nor cowardly, but engaged in a coherent moral strategy. To her credit, she came to understand what moved parents to put children in harm's way, beginning with the recognition that they were already in harm's way. Whereas the idea of the sacrificing parents was hardly new to the self-image of a beleaguered minority, the publicly demonstrated willingness to risk losing what was most precious supported the claim on public space itself, and made for a new, public, racial substance.

For men, the visible combination of sacrifice and transgression disrupted a long-established line between childhood and adulthood in the American construction of race. The infantilization of the black male - the phenomenon of grey-haired men being addressed as 'boy' by whites young enough to be their sons - was an old strategy of racial intimidation, with its immediate roots in the terrorism that overtook the South after the Tilden-Hayes Compromise of 1877 ended the Reconstruction. Even older roots can be found in the soil of the plantation presided over by the paternal slave-owner, where to be (publicly) the slave and the (unacknowledged) child of the white man could be literally the same thing. It was the interruption of this existential childish (or more generously, childlike) condition by the Reconstruction, with its spectacle of adult black men engaged in the public life of citizenship, that spurred the terror of the Klan. The black man was a political and sexual rival, but a 'boy' was either harmless or perverse, or dead, even when he intruded into the public eye.

The possibility that black Americans had internalized their infantilization proved to be a raw nerve for writers of the post-World-War-II period, as evidenced by the controversy over Richard Wright's novel *Native Son*. Wright's Bigger Thomas - a nightmarish genie in bottle of violence - may have been deserving of sympathy, but he was also emotionally, intellectually and morally stunted. In a series of commentaries on the book that effectively destroyed their friendships with the author, Ralph Ellison and James Baldwin both took Wright to task for perpetuating a racist construction of the black man-child, especially in an era when colonial subjects from India to Senegal were becoming citizens not only of their nation-states, but of the world. Wright had, of course, intended his famous protagonist to exemplify the damage done by racism and the explosive threat that damaged men posed to society, and it is as difficult to deny the psychological truth of Bigger Thomas as it is to deny that of Raskolnikov. Ellison and Baldwin, however, argued that it was an incomplete truth, and that Bigger, with his inarticulate violence, had been locked by his author into a particularly pernicious ghetto, in which the signifiers of adulthood - reason, wit, politics, art, agency, the awareness that home is located in a world of justice and injustice - were absent and impossible.

Ali, who was more a contemporary of Ellison and Baldwin than of Wright, added those signs of manhood and public wholeness to the subjectivity of the black American celebrity. Indeed, he made them constitutive of celebrity. The combination of adulthood and the overt violence of the boxer was potent stuff, and this potency can in no way be separated from Ali's famous sex appeal. It was threatening (and thrilling) not so much because Ali was exceptional, as because he was in the vanguard of a wider rejection of the ghetto of children. Indeed, it can be argued that the systematic destruction of the various Black Power movements in the late sixties and seventies by the agencies of the state, in which extra-legal violence was freely used, was aimed at defeating this breakout and restoring the boundaries of Bigger Thomas' world, transgression of which was merely criminal: a police matter.

It would, of course, be inaccurate to say that the restoration has been complete. But the fact that we find Ali's political bent to be extraordinary suggests that there has been a real rollback. Black American celebrities are far more common today than they were when Ali made his inflammatory remarks about Vietnam. Remarks about a country that has literally been set on fire should be inflammatory; it is soothing rhetoric that is outrageous in such circumstances. But for the most part, we have stepped back from the fiery stuff, Black Lives Matter notwithstanding. The apparent step backwards has not been towards the stoicism of a Jackie Robinson or even Nichelle Nichols, but in the direction of the pouting narcissism of Kanye West, in which self-love is totally disconnected from solidarity. It is connected, instead, to consumerism: what one buys and shows off, what one's name is used to sell, and one's own marketed image. It is connected, in spite of the content of rap lyrics, to a fundamentally inarticulate image of the petulant man-child who needs a mother - or a record company - to manage his petulance.

It is essential that this critique not slip into a dishonest or hypocritical rant about 'the black celebrity' today, particularly when the critic is located outside or on the margins of the black American experience. In 1986, when Chrissie Hynde excoriated Janet Jackson's generation of R&B musicians for having become the Pepsi Generation ('How much did you get for your soul?'), the validity of the observation wilted before the irony of a white commercial artist scolding black artists for being, well, commercial. Today, there can be little doubt that regardless of color, celebrity status - and the public voice it potentially carries - is far better contained by the marketplace than it was contained by *any* counter-authority in the 1960s. But since color can hardly be disregarded when it comes to worldwide distributions of power and resources, any context that appears to operate 'regardless of color' is deceptive: it has been actively, politically neutralized. Its horizon has shrunk so dramatically that

the world of injustice in which Ali fought and spoke, and that remained somewhat visible during the boycott of apartheid South Africa, is now quite invisible to those who seem to exist entirely in the public eye.

The stultifying effect of that containment is quite stark if we look beyond the American setting towards places where the corporate annexation of mass culture is relatively new. Sachin Tendulkar, for instance, is nearly a perfect example of iconic insularity. He had the good fortune of being one of the handful of modern athletes who have inhabited a level of 'greatness' that can come only from fortuitous cultural circumstances. Midway into his career in the 1990s, he was already celebrated - and not just in India - as the greatest batsman since Don Bradman, and certainly he had more media exposure and adulation than Bradman did in the 1930s. But Tendulkar's generation of Indian cricket stars - wealthier, more famous and more in the public eye than any previous lot of Indian athletes - were also extraordinarily buttoned up, even when they took their shirts off and ran victory laps around the stadium. They had nothing to say that went beyond platitudes, even about sport itself. They seemed incapable of anger or organization. Literally the products of economic liberalization, they were either privileged by the status quo or aspired to privilege; they lived in the world but hid from it in moneyed enclosures.

It helped that they were mostly middle-class, upper-caste and Hindu, but even those came from less secure social locations were generally uninterested in provocation. The exceptions, like Vinod Kambli, received no quarter from the gods, and their provocation was rendered as juvenile misbehavior. Unlike their predecessors, who at least occasionally spoke their minds, Indian athletes who emerged after 1991 were superbly contained, to the extent that sacrifice became not only incomprehensible but meaningless. They were guarded men in every sense of the term. They knew

better than to rock the gravy boat, comprising their sponsors, their boards and their government (which had become indistinguishable). They had, effectively, adopted the position of good children, to be seen but not heard except in jingles and propaganda. As men who saw, heard and spoke no evil, they were no less mutilated, and castrated, than Bigger Thomas or Vinod Kambli.

Ali was the product of a cruder arrangement of control, in which rebellion was both more imaginable and more compatible with celebrity status and public life. Its hallmark was an assertive wholeness of eyes, ears, brain and tongue: a breaking out into the world, not a zealous guarding of privacy. (We hear constantly how Tendulkar has had to protect his privacy.) Ali had to be put in jail, not in a mansion, and jail made him stronger. Now the mansion is containment enough. Outside the mansion, there is nothing except paparazzi: no politics, no pain, no joy. The public stage that was once experienced as liberation is now experienced as layers of containment, compliance and conformity. We have, in a sense, gone from one pole of extraordinary subjectivity, signified by rebelliousness and adulthood, to another, signified by docility disguised as dignity.

June 6, 2016

Posted by [Satadru Sen](#) at 7:53 PM [Links to this post](#)

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When Doves Cry (For No Good Reason)

The deaths of first David Bowie and then Prince, in fairly quick succession, have unleashed upon us – us being the global middle class, although not equally global in all places – a particular variation of the phenomenon of public mourning. I must admit to being slightly repulsed by it. I liked Bowie and Prince, and listened to ‘Darling Nikki’ with a certain relish when I was fifteen. But I was never what might be considered a fan, and stand outside the circle of public mourning in which everybody is not only a fan but a performer as well, acting out their love. Public mourning is, by its nature, a performance. What is it about our moment that induces well educated, ironically inclined individuals to openly self-flagellate and recite lyrics like ‘Dearly beloved, we are gathered here today to get through this thing called life’ as if this was profound or poetic? There is, obviously, more than one factor at play, and these overlap: the impact of the recording industry on individuality and generational identity, the intertwining of individuality and loneliness, the yearning for community bred by loneliness, and the rise of virtual communities of compulsive performers. In these communities, subjectivity is necessarily and compulsively absurd, and this absurdity occasionally loses its ironic cover and stands naked, reverent and ridiculous.

The idea of a ‘generation’ did not fully exist before the nineteenth century. It emerged from disjunctures in society that were generated in the first instance by pedagogy and subsequently (and not entirely separately) by capitalism. In colonized as well as metropolitan societies, young people were subjected to educational regimes that differed sharply from what their parents had experienced, and that produced the school as a space that was ‘away’ from home. In this world apart, children were definitively ‘different’ from their parents. This difference lent itself not only to panic and condemnation by parents who could not ‘understand the kids’, but to Romanticism and to the bourgeois experience itself, well before the turn of the twentieth century.

But the idea that *music* could form the boundaries and substance of a ‘generation’ had to wait for the years following the First World War, not least because the war produced further, sharper rents between those who fought, those who gave the orders to fight, and those who looked on. These rents, Paul Fussell wrote, were the spaces within which the ironic sensibility germinated and took over, permanently dooming Victorians and Edwardians to quaintness. With the simultaneous and mutually reinforcing maturing of gramophone technology and commercial radio, and the emergence of a broad prosperity – especially in America – that sold more things to more people than ever before, recorded music became a primary vehicle of irony and irreverence, marking

generational identity more ‘naturally’ and democratically (for what is a generation if not democratic?) than the old-school-tie and even literature ever could. It also bridged, silently but substantially, the political rent between the generations, establishing a contradiction that has remained integral to the business of popular music. Those who participated in a common market of the buyers and sellers of identity could never be entirely hostile to each other.

Adapting F. Scott Fitzgerald, the American social historian Paula Fass used the phrase ‘the damned and the beautiful’ to describe this first musical generation. The damnation and beauty were both ascribed by outsiders (like disapproving pastors and salivating advertisers), but they were also embraced by the generation itself, which gave it its peculiar narcissism: that slightly doom-and-gloom inflected self-absorption that was entirely compatible with hedonism and that colored the experience of the individual undergraduate as well as the crowd at a party or a nightclub. After the coming of the baby boom and rock and roll, that narcissism filled the concert venue with its collective hysteria and waving cigarette-lighters, and gave U2 lyrics their anthemic quality: the earnest, self-adoring ‘we’ of ‘we can break through,’ ‘we can be one’ and ‘we are the world.’ In its merger of melancholy and euphoria, loneliness and community, this subjectivity of the group-hug contained more than a trace of the parallel phenomenon of fascism (to say nothing of the church), albeit with a better soundtrack. Irony turned out to be an affectation, incompatible with the valorization of permanent childhood or a ‘youth culture’ one never outgrew.

Even the quality of the soundtrack is misleading. Like fascism, the generational identity produced by the consumption of music has come with a devaluing of aesthetics, or philistinism, that manifests itself in inflated and distorted reactions to the deaths of rock stars. It is one thing to hold forth publicly on ‘our grief’ at the evident mortality of, say, John Lennon, or in the future, Bob Dylan and Michael Stipe. There is in those cases an undeniable ideological and aesthetic content – that might be summarized as poetry – worth mourning. But when the banality of ‘Dearly beloved, we are gathered here today to get through this thing called life’ followed by a few good guitar licks becomes the lexicon of grief, and we declare our undying ‘love’ for kitsch and dead pop musicians, what are ‘we’ mourning? Along with poetry, we would seem to be devaluing grief itself.

Most charitably, it might be argued that we are mourning ourselves: ‘the way we were’ in, say, the year *Purple Rain* played on FM radio. We are trying, pathetically, to recover the disposed bits of ourselves from the dustbins of generations, and from the dispersed souls – classmates, neighbors, relatives, lovers, the dead – that have made a ghostly last stand on Facebook and Twitter. The music and the musician’s name function like a photograph, and it’s not especially good photography: a selfie, so to speak. That fundamentally maudlin experience of self-love and panic (the ‘we’ breaking down into an ‘I’ that is shorter of breath, more than one day closer to death) is dignified and assuaged ultimately by its immersion in a public ritual of nostalgia. It is not cheapened, because it was cheap – affordable, throwaway, mass-marketed– in the first place.

May 4, 2016

Posted by [Satadru Sen](#) at [12:06 PM](#) [Links to this post](#)

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Serbia With Nukes



In an [essay](#) published in Haaretz in 2006, Tony Judt referred to Israel as ‘Serbia with nukes.’ The phrase was not his own; he was citing an unnamed person, who was himself adapting Helmut Schmidt’s dismissive description of the Soviet Union (‘Upper

Volta with nukes'). But Judt was not being random or flippant in his choice of analogies. A decade after the war in what used to be Yugoslavia, Serbia still carried a stench. It was not just the stench of massacred civilians, rape camps and ethnic cleansing, but also of a particular kind of nationhood: one saturated with aggression and self-pity. Identified (not least by themselves) with Slobodan Milosevic, Radovan Karadzic and Ratko Mladic, Serbs appeared obsessed with wrongs - old and new - suffered at the hands of outsiders and internal enemies, convinced that nobody understood their insecurity in their own homeland, and driven by a monstrous, paranoid desire for dominance. It warped them to the extent that they were no longer recognizable as civilized, let alone liberal and democratic in the post-Cold-War European self-image. They were, moreover, not only driven by a sense of their own importance (to Europe and civilization), but actually not much more than a small tribe of provincials. That Serbs themselves could acknowledge their pathology is evident in Srdan Spasojevic's wryly titled *A Serbian Film*, which was promptly banned all over the world for its unflinching depiction of a savage dystopia.

When Judt suggested that Israel was 'Serbia with nukes,' in the aftermath of brutal invasions of Gaza and Lebanon, he thus pointed to a mode of civic identity and political functioning that is both horrifying and laughable: the mode of an unbalanced child with deadly weapons, a danger to itself as well to those around it. Watching events in India unfold over the past few days, I was reminded of Judt's use of the phrase, and wondered if it does not describe India also. There too, a majority that is undeniably in command of every sector of social, political and economic life is obsessed with what it calls the 'appeasement' of minorities. There too, monstrous things have happened, not just once in a while but as a matter of course. There too, world-power pretensions are simultaneously desperate and ludicrous, because of the nationalist conviction that the enemies that matter most ('anti-national elements') are within its borders. The nationalist is, in other words, unable to pull his head out of his ass: his vision of the world is limited by his uncontrollable desire for revenge

against what is within his own body. Even the obsession with Pakistan is merely the displacement of an internal enmity to a location just beyond an unconvincing border.

It is useful to look at the JNU crisis in the light - or rather, pitch darkness - of this rectal nationhood. In some ways, what has happened at JNU must be welcomed: the attacks on students by police and patriotic mobs, and the statements by various politicians affiliated with the government, have clarified things. When sedition laws are deployed against student politicians making speeches on campus, a defendant in a courtroom is assaulted by goons (who are also lawyers!) in front of the police not once but twice, and cabinet ministers declare that “the nation can never tolerate insults to Mother India,” we should have no trouble using the word ‘fascism.’ Suddenly, ordinary Indians - not just cranky academics - are using it, and even some who voted for the BJP in the last election are dismayed. References to Germany in the 1930s are being bandied about more or less nakedly in the [Indian press](#), to say nothing of the network of diasporic commentators and users of social media. We need only be a little surprised that it took people so long to follow the cranky academics and pseudo-secular bleeding hearts, who began fretting after the 2014 election.

The fascist attacks on JNU are welcome also because they are not really about JNU, or even about any particular principle associated with that university. They are, rather, about very general ideas of the nature of the state, the content of nationhood and the meaning of dissent. It happened at JNU, but it could have just as easily have happened at another university, although in that case, the national anguish would probably have been more muted. But because the arrest and beating of a student for giving a mildly ‘anti-national’ speech happened at an institution that has long prized its elite status, large numbers of Indians have been moved to identify with the poor *jholawalas*. This, as I said, is a good thing, because if decent, middle-class, Hindu

citizens will not take to the streets or use the f-word when pregnant Muslim women are cut open and fetuses ripped out, men are lynched for having the wrong kind of meat in the fridge, and families are herded into ghetto-like camps because their homes have gone up in flames, at least they will march when the same forces come after smart, smartly dressed members of the 'majority community.' Something extraordinary is happening in the country, the Supreme Court opined yesterday. Indeed, but it did not start at JNU. At most, it can be said that the JNU incident alerted the majority that it too can be cast in the role of the 'anti-national element.' It produced an insight - and such insights are rare for national majorities - that JNU and Naroda Patiya are on the same continuum. It is that insight that is extraordinary. And because it is difficult to bear, there is already the impulse to separate the predicament of the *jholawalas* from the predicament of the circumcised. While the widespread impulse of Indian liberals and their foreign allies to 'stand in solidarity' with JNU is laudable, the *jholawalas* need our solidarity much less than do the *katuas*. If the dignity of the latter was assured, the former would have no trouble.

It is comforting, no doubt, to rally around 'the Constitution' in extraordinary times, or around 'the republic,' as many alarmed Indians have done in the past week. This is understandable; one needs handles to gain ideological traction. But the republic is not some pristine principle, and the Indian Constitution, like any constitution, is a flawed political product. Fetishizing them will take us only so far. The Constitution and the republic have not prevented gross abuses of power in the past, from police violence against the poor, Dalits and minorities, through brutal counterinsurgency tactics in remote corners of the map, to stifled speech at every turn. They have not prevented rampant discrimination in housing and employment, or diverted polite, university-educated, middle-class citizens from their smug conversations about 'those people.' (Most fascists are perfectly nice.) The Sangh Parivar did not invent all this, and people have not always taken to the streets (or Facebook) in protest. While some of those abuses are in the nature of the modern state, others are specifically rooted

in the Indian state, which has attempted from the outset to deploy democracy without liberalism. It is only now, when the outright fascists are in power, that the implications of that formula have come home to roost, and citizens who have been at best wishy-washy about liberal principles are reaching for the Constitution. But it may very well be necessary to take a closer look at the Constitution itself - and at the principles to which the citizen is willing to commit - before 'the republic' can provide adequate protection against commonplace episodes of the extraordinary.

There is, in addition, a dire need to look again at the purposes of Indian nationhood. That nationhood needs a purpose will, of course, appear nonsensical to some: to the dyed-in-the-wool nationalist, especially on the political right, nationhood simply is. It creates a state to protect its boundaries, and it regards dissent as a challenge to its very existence. That is the starting point of Serbia-with-nukes. Indian nationhood, however, has historically had a romantic component that is intertwined with the idea of justice: the idea that underlying the miraculous historical convergence of people from Kashmir to Kanyakumari, Punjab to Assam, is the objective of doing 'the right thing,' and not just for yourself. The right thing could be derived from the European Enlightenment or from sources closer to home, but the principle guided a wide range of ideologues: Nehru, Ambedkar, Gandhi, Rabindranath and even Bose, who was not a democrat. The imperative of justice, and not just self-interest, produced something new in the form of a national identity, a national space, and a national state. That, really, is the only defensible reason to be a nationalist. Otherwise there is no point in being so absurdly attached to arbitrary borders assembled by a regime that everybody recognizes as illegitimate: the British-Indian colonial state. Nor is there any point in arresting, beating and hanging those who question the map.

India is not Serbia or Israel, and not just because it is much bigger in every way. But there has emerged in India a tribe of Serbs, who appear superficially to be two different tribes. One is rustic, boorish, clad in saffron bandannas or khaki shorts, highly sensitive to 'insults to the nation,' and imbued with a predilection for murder and rape. The other is suave, English-speaking (with the right private-school accent), well-shod, and clad in neatly ironed shirts. They do not, as a general rule, murder or rape. But because they share the vision of a nationhood that is forever threatened by 'anti-nationals,' and that has no purpose except revenge and dominance, they give their approval to the murderers and rapists, and show themselves to be provincials of the worst sort. They are a menace to their neighbors, compatriots and themselves, and no one is more responsible for the farcical reality of a twenty-first-century nation-state that relies on mob violence to reassure itself of its permanence, continues to debate whether Shivaji was greater than Aurangzeb, and uses sedition laws against those who give the wrong answer.

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Lynch-mob nation



In the cosmopolitan southern city of Bangalore this week, a Tanzanian woman was dragged out of a car, beaten, partially stripped, and ‘paraded’ by a mob. Her assailants, it seems, were angry about an unrelated accident, in which a Sudanese student had hit and killed a pedestrian. The details are appalling: when the young Tanzanian tried to escape her tormentors by jumping on a bus, the passengers threw her back to the crowd, and when she tried to file a report with the police, she was sneeringly told to produce the Sudanese man (whom she did not know) first. The scrap of comfort that can be gleaned here is that one bystander had stepped forward to help the woman, only to be beaten mercilessly by the mob. But there has also been some anguish about ‘what we have become’: how racist, how lawless, and so on. Even the contributors to the [comments](#) sections in the mainstream press have recoiled, in the equivalent of an embarrassed crowd. Since [lynching](#) and mob violence are neither new nor rare in the modern Indian experience, however, it is worth asking whether the assumption that there has been a change for the worse - a moral and civic decline - is actually justified, and when lynching becomes commonplace.

For those familiar with Indian public life and its [patterns of violence](#), what happened to the Tanzanian woman is almost entirely familiar, and not just because of the rage that lurks below the surface of relations between the car-borne and the pedestrian. The particulars of the Bangalore incident are easily recognizable as the idiom of violence against low-caste women in rural areas and provincial towns, and even urban women on ‘festive’ occasions. In a patriarchal society, there is nothing like [sexual humiliation](#) and terror to enforce the intertwined hierarchies of caste, class and gender. That enforcement is typically abetted by the police, who are after all there to maintain ‘order’ in every sense of the word.

The spectacle of the violent crowd - engaged either in a pogrom against a 'community' or in the lynching of a stray victim - should not surprise Indians. The rioting mob has been a part of public affairs in independent India from the outset, acting out a rogue history that resists historicizing and frustrates those whose preferred national narrative is one of warring states. It might be argued that such mob action is the sign of a ramshackle modernity in which the state is weak both ideologically and structurally: it has no monopoly on either the legitimacy or the means of violence. Every once in a while, the liberal pretensions of the republic are exposed as irrelevant and alien, and the citizenry reverts to its primal state.

That argument is not altogether without merit; the ideological gulf between the crowd and the state in India can hardly be denied, although it can be romanticized by those who see the subaltern crowd as the repository of an alternative and superior civic virtue. It may, however, be more accurate to say that the problem is not the gap between the crowd and the state, but the overlap. Here, I want to draw attention to two other histories of chronic mob violence: anti-black terror in the United States between the Civil War and the Civil Rights Movement, and anti-Jewish terror in Germany in the 1930s and '40s.

The American example is [overtly noticeable](#) to those who were shocked by the attack on the Tanzanian woman, because of the shared element of violence against those identified as 'black.' That connection, however, is a red herring. Anti-black racism is not a uniform or universal phenomenon; its roots and rationales vary from one historical setting to another. American bigotry is only tenuously related to Indian contempt for the dark-skinned. The more interesting overlap has to do with the relationship between the crowd, the state and the pariah. The epidemic of lynching which began in the American South even before the Reconstruction had ended was not just about reestablishing white supremacy and intimidating the generation of blacks who had grown up after the Civil War. It was also about creating rituals that would demarcate the boundaries and content of blackness - articulated as spatial segregation, sexual containment, disenfranchisement and the condition of terror

itself - at a moment when slavery no longer supplied the parameters. Mob violence clarified and policed the outcaste status of people who were otherwise entitled to the permissions of freedom and citizenship. At the same time, it generated for Southern whites a method of defiance, not only against the federal government and the Republican Party but also against republican principles of American identity, recovering from it the narrower ideology of white democracy that had its roots in Andrew Jackson's nation even more than the Confederacy. Lynching thus became the basis of a local governance that was contextually at odds with the national government: a rift in the state, in which the crowd established a semi-legitimate Southern shadow-state. It could be tolerated by the national state, not only because tolerance was politically expedient following the rehabilitation of the Democratic Party, but because it was consistent with the delinquent side of American praxis. Frontiers and colonial warfare came with their own rituals of racial violence. Teddy Roosevelt, imperialist and frontiersman, could thus both disdain and accept the lynch-mob politics of the South.

In the German case, that distance between the legitimate and illegitimate states was eventually closed. After 1933 but well before the Wannsee Conference, the mob and the state had become interchangeable, in the sense that each spoke and acted in the name of the other, and also provided cover for each other. Mob violence, as in Kristallnacht, functioned as a surrogate for state violence. Once the Final Solution began, the mob was fully absorbed by the state and lost its visibility as an autonomous entity, i.e., as a mob. In each these aspects - the emergence of the mob as a proxy of the state, and the redundancy of the mob - Germany showcased an arrangement of power that is fascist in the first instance, and fascist as well as totalitarian in the second. Lynching in the American South, in contrast, was 'merely' a form of productive terror. Whereas the state-mob in Germany produced the Jew and the Gypsy as vermin (or, as Agamben would have it, as beings removed from the domain of legality and illegality), seeking ultimately to dissolve the ghetto and empty the camp, Klan terror produced the Negro as a subordinated minority, to be kept in its new designated place.

When a mob in Bangalore terrorizes an African student, the American reference is actually the least applicable. There is no question of reimagining black students in India as a 'minority.' Euro-American racism has certainly leached into Indian speech and behavior (more in the diaspora than in India itself, I would suggest), but this borrowing is so thinly rooted in the history of that racism that it is highly superficial: an easily available imitative gesture, like the monkey-gestures that were directed at the black Australian cricketer Andrew Symonds in India some years ago. Indian racism against people perceived as black, and Africans in particular, is real and pervasive, but it is not an ideology in its own right. It is, rather, a practice extemporized from cultural rubble: neighborhood and campus tensions, perceptions of the relative wealth and power of different categories of foreigners, imported discourses of savagery that are understood at the level of picture books. Affiliating that racism with its American counterpart is like ascribing 'anti-Semitism' - a European ideology with a European history bracketed by Jewish emancipation after 1791 and annihilation before 1945 - to Arabs in the erstwhile Ottoman lands and post-Algerian-War Europe. To paraphrase Hannah Arendt, anti-black racism in India is not primarily about blacks, blackness, or aversion to dark skin. It is about an illiberal community reacting to a perceived foreign presence in its midst when foreignness is unprotected by a color - of skin or of passport - associated with power.

It is also about the widening of an Indian practice of normalcy and dominance, in which the status of women, minorities, outsiders and pariahs is underlined by recognizable rituals of crowd violence. The Tanzanian woman was treated like a Dalit, not because she was black, but because that is how Indian crowds have long put people in their place and experienced themselves as communities of power. Bangladeshis and Biharis (and at one time, Gujaratis and 'Madrasis') in Mumbai, Manipuris and Nagas in Delhi, Sikhs in 1984, [the Chinese](#) in 1962, and Dalits, Muslims and women (of all classes and communities, although not equally) at all times have been subjected to the order of the mob. Well-developed discourses of otherness and inferiority exist only in the last three instances, but it turns out that such discourses are not necessary for that much-debated Indian phenomenon: 'intolerance.' Racism

towards Africans is readily acknowledged as an Indian problem even by people who bristle at the suggestion that there is widespread intolerance towards Muslims. The first makes India 'look bad' in the global press, and the acknowledgment of crimes against foreigners is a part of the damage-control. The second is intimate and existential. Like a crime within the family, it cannot be admitted even to yourself.

If something has gone wrong, it began decades ago, when older patterns of exclusion and domination converged with new civic identities, rendering public space particularly dangerous to anyone who could be identified as a misfit or an upstart. What has happened relatively recently, however, is a reinforcement of that public violence by the state, which is increasingly prepared to utilize the mob as a surrogate. A distinction must be made at this juncture. The reliance of Indian politicians and parties on mobs (usually organized from cadres or hired lumpen) is of long standing, and every party that has sniffed power has been guilty of it. But the mob-as-nation is a specialty of the Hindu right, which can govern the state but also strategically locate itself outside the state, among the 'public.' Nationhood itself - with its compulsive quest for an order of insiders and outsiders - has, accordingly, taken on the quality of the mob.

Few would argue that the Indian government systematically encourages attacks on Tanzanian women, or on blacks. (Besides, Karnataka is governed by the Congress, not the BJP.) But it does not seem to be especially disturbed by such attacks either, because what happened in Bangalore is not divergent from a particular understanding of nationhood, with its rituals of belonging, demands for order, and assorted compulsions. In this nation, the many will always take for granted the right to humiliate or kill the few - it knows no other way of self-constitution, with the exception of an anxious self-congratulation that highlights its investment in modernity. The day after the incident, Indian scientists announced their development of a vaccine for the Zika virus (a proud moment for the nation, naturally), underlining the Indian condition as a scientifically accomplished lynch mob. As I observed earlier, it is not really about blacks. It is always about Muslims, Dalits and women, in the

sense that that is where the patterns and permissions of Indian mob violence originate.

February 5, 2016

The Death of a Jew



Following close upon the golden jubilee celebrations of ‘victory’ in the 1965 war against Pakistan, with its imbedded celebration of the Anglo-Indian hero [Alfred Cooke](#), has come another moment of remembrance in the history of the Indian state: the passing of J.F.R. Jacob. Jacob was, more or less famously, the only ‘Jewish general’ in the Indian

Army and one of the architects of the Pakistani surrender in the Bangladesh War. His visage graces the iconic photograph of the surrender ceremony in Dhaka in 1971. (Jacob stands towards the right of the frame, above, with a young Air Force officer gripping his arm.) By his own admission, Jacob was not a religious man and may not have been entirely comfortable with the tendency of his admirers – mainly Indian and Israeli – to underline his Jewishness. Nevertheless, every obituary has led with some version of ‘Jake the Jew.’

How extraordinary this treatment is must be emphasized. When Sam Manekshaw, the most celebrated soldier in Indian history, died not long ago, few headline-writers in the mainstream press thought to describe him as ‘the Parsi general,’ and no eulogist gloated about the fact that a Zoroastrian had led the Indian Army. Likewise, when Air Chief Marshall Idris Latif, the only Muslim to head an Indian military service, passes away, his religion will be mentioned politely in the small print, as is only right. Denis La Fontaine will not be ‘India’s Christian air chief’; Christians are too prosaic. Clearly, being a ‘minority,’ in and of itself, is not all that noteworthy. When it is noteworthy, it is unevenly so: Alfred Cooke was embraced *in spite of* his Anglo-Indian ancestry (and even then, nobody mentioned his religion), but Jacob was celebrated *because* he was an Indian Jew. Coming at a time when minorities are not especially popular in India, this invites us to think about the conditions under which a national majority becomes generous towards the impurities it contains.

The concept of a ‘minority’ is something of a novelty. It became meaningful only in the nineteenth century, as a corollary of the new institutions of popular sovereignty and the democratic nation-state. In India, the term was most firmly associated with Muslims, beginning with colonial historiography, proceeding through Aligarh’s foundational debates and the nationalist polemics of the 1880s and 1890s, and becoming concretized in the Minto-Morley reforms of 1909. Partition reinforced the concrete, but also added a new complication by making policy (management) rather than politics (accommodation) the normative idiom of relations between the majority and the minorities. Throughout this trajectory, the concept secreted layers of negative

connotations: not only was it a calamity to be a minority, it was a misfortune to *have* minorities. In much of this, the Indian experience was consistent with trends in political demography elsewhere in the world that emerged from the Great War.

Yet models exist in that world for ‘good minorities’ and even happy minorities. The best known such model is, conveniently, known in America as the ‘model minority.’ That term has been used since the 1970s to refer explicitly to ‘Asian immigrants,’ who do well at school, do not trouble the police, and appear to affirm the ‘American’ values of hard work, self-reliance (not relying upon government assistance), single-minded acquisitiveness and ‘family,’ at a time (the aftermath of the Counterculture and the Civil Rights Movement) when ‘Americans’ themselves had evidently wavered in their faith in those things. The deconstruction of the model minority, coming in the first instance from Asian American scholars like Ronald Takaki, has been very thorough. Its critics have noted that while the notion compensated somewhat for the virulence of the Asian Exclusion Acts, the lynch mobs in the Pacific Northwest, the wartime internment of people of Japanese ancestry, and seventy years of murder and dehumanization of ‘gooks’ and ‘slopes’ (who can breathe easier now that attention has turned to ‘ragheads’ and ‘Art Malik’), it has been more pernicious than generous. It has highlighted the success of some Asians (mainly Japanese, Chinese, Koreans and Indians from middle-class backgrounds), blacked out the less advantaged and successful, and trapped *all* Asian Americans within the exotic category of ‘immigrant,’ to be contrasted with real Americans, whose realness is reified by their imperiled virtues. The model minority is a handy stick with which to beat other minorities (including Asians, but always and primarily blacks, Hispanics and Native Americans) for their apparent fecklessness. Beyond that, it has imposed on all minorities – the successful and the feckless – a constricting model of citizenship that emphasizes docility: not challenging the prerogatives of the majority, not questioning the meanings of success, not taking over the ‘good schools’ and ‘excellent neighborhoods,’ not making waves. The model minority is, in the final analysis, a model of apolitical citizenship as the subjectivity of a ‘good’ minority, which allows the majority to bury its history and politics of racism.

The notion of a 'good minority' is not alien to India, where linguistic minorities have been a fact of political life since the 1920s. In the Presidency capitals, an expanded political pie and massive in-migration made it necessary for regional politicians to work out a language that could accommodate – or isolate – the misfits. But who was a good minority at the national level? For a long time, the answer was obvious: the model minority in India were the Sikhs. Not only did they fit easily into the anti-Muslim thrust of nationalist historiography, they were endowed with qualities that Hindus were often unsure they possessed: Sikhs were industrious, 'martial' and hyper-patriotic. It was a nationalist redemption of the colonial trope of the simple, loyal peasant-soldier. Sikhs themselves seemed to embrace their role as semi-detached Hindus, and happily referred to themselves as the 'sword arm of the nation.'

The fragility of this model of minority citizenship became inescapable in the 1980s, with the onset of Sikh terrorism, the Delhi pogrom, and the years of profiling and 'encounter' killings. When Shabeg Singh, another icon of the 1971 war, used his military expertise *against* the Indian Army in Operation Blue Star, the hero became the traitor in shockingly literal terms. The wounds healed with Manmohan Singh's stint as prime minister, but not completely. The romance was gone, and the good minority is nothing if not a romantic concept: a specter of the majority's love affair with its own national mythology.

What went wrong with the Sikhs? It was not simply the demands for autonomy or secession. It was the revelation of a reluctance to accept the status of quasi-Hindus, which fully-credentialed Hindus could neither understand nor forgive. (Nothing is as embarrassing as interrupted self-love.) Just as pertinently, Sikhs asserting their separateness – whether from Hindus or from India – were able to mobilize politically. Even a two-percent minority can do that when two percent is more than fifteen million people, concentrated geographically and already equipped with political organizations and useful histories. The otherwise useful Sikhs, therefore, failed that crucial test of a lovable minority: docility.

If we return to the photograph of the Pakistani surrender in 1971, in which the romance of Indian cosmopolitanism is fully on display, we see immediately that Sikhs are well represented, notably by General Arora, the senior Indian commander in the eastern theater. They are not, however, performing as a minority. Being politically alive and viable, Sikhs are not exotic. They are not in the frame as curiosities. General Jacob is. Some three decades ago, a relative of mine – a retired group captain in the Indian Air Force – told me that Jacob's presence at the ceremony was intended to compound the Pakistani humiliation by forcing them to surrender to a Jew. It is difficult to imagine Indira Gandhi and Jagjivan Ram plotting such a detail, but it is significant that it was the perception of Indian officers with some awareness of world politics. Jacob in 1971 was already a symbolic Jew.

He was also the most perfect kind of minority: a man with a race but without a racial community. The number of Jews in India is so small (barely five thousand) that mobilizing as a community – coming together with an agenda and a means of applying pressure – would seem to be out of the question. Indian Jews can, at most, express their dismay when some fool in Ahmedabad opens a boutique called '[Hitler](#).' They are, in that sense, a docile minority, and can be placed on the shelf of the nation's trophies. The same can be said for Parsis. They too are a model minority, running gracefully out of bodies and vultures. The Tatas have put to rest the old Parsi reputation of being 'bum-lickers of the English': a stigma that Anglo-Indians could not fully escape. In Bapsi Sidhwa's novel *Cracking India*, a Parsi woman in newly independent Pakistan explains to her child that they are, and must remain, like sugar in a cup of tea: sweetening and invisible. But the Parsi predicament is also different from that of Indian Jews. Jews are more useful. Being Parsi has no global significance. Jewishness does, and that meaning dovetails with specific Indian agendas, historical and contemporary.

The post-1945 Zionist tendency to deploy an exceptional and existential victimhood – 'everybody hates us, so everything is justified' – has made it possible for Indian nationalist discourse to claim an exception of its own. In India, the narrative goes, Jews were never persecuted. This may very well be true, give or take the Inquisition in Goa.

But the assertion has not only allowed the spokesmen of the Indian majority to proclaim their own 'tolerance' and inherent cosmopolitanism (which, it turns out, is compatible with fascist imaginings of nationhood), it has also aligned them with a strand within contemporary Zionism, which is its anti-Muslim animus. This promises to take Hindutva politics out of the backwater, connecting it to another national narrative and a global concern (articulated in terms of 'terror,' 'security' and 'Islam'). It also cements the relationship between India and Israel at a time when both states have reached a majoritarian nadir.

It may be, of course, that eulogists casually invoking 'Jake the Jew' are merely drawing attention to a harmless bit of trivia, without political 'intentions' or 'agendas.' When they do that, however, they reduce race and the racialized individual to trivia: the harmless fluff that is the essence of a model minority. The harmless is tied up with utility and the comfort of the majority; for that reason, it is political. The celebration of General Jacob's Jewishness then feeds (and feeds upon) majoritarian self-congratulation and tokenism, and simultaneously sharpens the distinction between good and bad minorities in India. The more or less solitary Jew, identified with national victory and globally aligned with power and civilization, is good. The Muslim, with his numbers and birthrate and place in history, is not. He is the trouble the Jew does not give the nation. He is *unser Unglück*. Sikhs have proved to be manageable; they can be either pogrom victims or prime ministers.

Jacob was not an innocent observer in the politics of his identity. He may have been ambivalent about his faith, but he took racial identity seriously enough to work hard for closer ties between the Indian and Israeli states. That effort, while understandable, highlights an important dynamic of being a model minority. It shows where, and with whom, one chooses to stand, and how one is willing to be used. When a minority lacks the demographic means of political self-assertion, there still remains the option of self-assertion on behalf of other minorities, within the larger community with which it identifies. Jacob liked to say he was 'Indian through and through.' I would like to think that that means standing in solidarity with those Indians who are excluded from 'model'

status. Such solidarity, however, might mean that when you die, you would not be a national icon, but merely a troublemaker.

January 18, 2016

Posted by [Satadru Sen](#) at [9:28 PM](#) [Links to this post](#)

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Life in the Jungle

An old friend died recently on the other side of the planet. It was both predictable and shocking, as these things often are. He was a long-term abuser of powders and pills; I had not expected him to live as long as he did. Still, we had been children together, neighbors, brothers almost, at that crucial period in modern male friendship: early adolescence. So I was shaken when I got the call from another friend and ex-neighbor. It was as if a few bricks fell away from the walls of my house, but it wasn't a house I live in anymore.

Over the next few days, the grapevines of social media (through which old acquaintances had tried to reimagine themselves as old friends) yielded slippery details and problems. He had died in his sleep in a hotel in Paharganj, the seedy Delhi neighborhood frequented by white tourists in dirty pyjamas. A bottle of sleeping pills was found in his bag. His mother was with him. They had been traveling together from Moscow to Durgapur, the industrial city where we had lived as children; she had spent the night in

the same bed unaware that he was dead. She had dementia and a tendency to wander off. There was a brother in Canada; he was on his way but, we were informed, reluctant to take his mother back with him. The mutual friend and I tried to find an old-age home in our old hometown where she could be safely abandoned, among people who might visit her once or twice.

I also tried to remember the dead man, or boy. I dreamed of him several nights in a row even though we had not spoken in nearly thirty years. This lag was not due to a quarrel, but because we had drifted so far apart that nothing was mutually comprehensible or relevant. So it was startling to find photographs of a big-eared twelve-year-old slouching in his room circa 1982. It regenerated a face, which allowed other images and sounds to creep back: the grinning face in my window on weekend mornings, the stuttering shout of my name, his presence in my house on the day of the year when sisters give their brothers a protective fingerprint (having no sister of his own, he would borrow mine), the telephone ringing just when my mother was taking her cherished siesta on her day off from teaching. I remembered endless hours of batting practice, and the sight of him airborne before his delivery stride, head cocked, arm and wrist coiled, lanky. He revered Michael Holding. I remembered a small crime we had conspired to commit (inspired by James Hadley Chase) and the unraveling of the conspiracy, the embarrassed-indulgent rage of parents. I was able to recall an even older image, from before we became friends: a boy of five or six throwing a tearful tantrum on the bus because he didn't want to go to school. It's not that I had never thought of these things in three decades. But it had been knowledge rather than remembrance, cut off from life.

It was, among other things, knowledge of waste and luck, which is why it had been pushed to the margins of memory. One more boy wasted by a system of education, examinations and professional bottlenecks that gave no quarter to those who could not, or did not want to, stay in the fast lane, which was also the only lane. Healthy competition, the schools called it, as if there was something laudable about brutal hours of cramming and 'private tuition,' fetishizing 'coming first' in examinations, being 'ranked' in your class beginning when you were five years old, the smugness and alarm of parents who shared the hierarchy of their children, and the fear of falling out of the middle class altogether. The perversity of that education was inseparable from our teachers' proclivity for creative physical violence. I don't look back at my Indian schooling with any pleasure or nostalgia; the memory of those grey walls is enough to fill my stomach with a dull anxiety. I lived with the nausea – the longing to be anywhere

else instead – for nearly ten years. (The feeling came back to me when I began dropping my daughter off at school, and I had to force myself to see that her school was not what mine had been.) My dead friend, who had been an intelligent boy with eclectic interests and bookshelves, was also an average student in a system that chewed up such children. I got out just in time; he did not and became a ‘failure.’ When I met him again at the age of nineteen, he was injecting heroin into his scrotum and stealing cough syrup. He had nothing to say that was not recycled tripe. He was not the only one. There but for the grace of God went I.

The Jesuit jailhouse of our childhood dissolved into the city itself, turning it grey: grey school-buses, grey shorts, grey mornings, dirty white sky. As with the school, I can’t go back there without a sense of dread. I know this contradicts the conventions of NRI nostalgia. (But then, bin Ich nicht ein bloede NRI.) We are supposed to look back with affection and pride, and there is undeniably something romantic about Durgapur and other ‘steel towns’ that came up in India in the 1950s. This was the frontier of Nehru and Bidhan Roy: instant cities in the wilderness that had secreted legendary bandits like Bhabani Pathak and Ichhai Ghosh, marked by receding forests, smoke-stacks, geometric housing developments, no extremes of wealth and poverty, no crime to speak of (polite scientists and their well-bred wives had replaced the bandits), no filth on the streets (but nasty chemicals in the air and the river), sheltered and sheltering, a modern Indian Eden where everybody knew their neighbors and spoke three languages, and nobody talked about religion or caste. In the evening, the horizon would turn an attractive orange as the blast furnaces roared and released their slag.

As a new city where even the old residents were first-generation migrants from elsewhere, Durgapur was a place constituted by arrivals and departures. Men and women came, recognizing their roles as pioneers, but expecting to leave at the end of their working lives. Parts of the town retained that touch of the makeshift: Steel Market, where we bought Tintins and textbooks, cricket balls and orange squash, was a double row of Quonset huts – corrugated-iron barracks – on a dirt road. For children, home was always encroached upon by departure, because the same schools that consumed their lives in the city would spit them out of the city, towards ‘real’ cities where there were colleges, careers and airports. (Durgapur had only a railway station.) To remain in this place was a sign of failure.

Into this place that was also no place at all, at some point in the mid-1960s, my friend's mother had come, a Russian scientist who had married an Indian engineer given to spells of withdrawal and melancholy, and what was probably schizophrenia. The few friends she made in Durgapur included my mother. *Birokto korbena* ("Don't bother me"), she told my mother, was her husband's frequent response to her desire for his company. She had hung on for a long time. As a foreigner, she was even more afflicted by the limbo between arrival and eventual departure; the sense of isolation must have been acute. I remember her – and her husband – as being simultaneously present and absent, inseparable from the failure that swallowed my friend. In attractively modern company housing, husbands turned cold and wives seethed with rage at being stranded in the jungle with their various disappointments, while children lingered on the cricket field after dark or wandered the streets in the burning heat of May afternoons because it was better than going home. Anyone could turn feral. The town wasted the Russian woman just as it wasted her son, and there's a morbid irony in the likelihood that she will live out her final years there, in this wilderness of unreliable memory. There but for the grace of God; but quite a few of us did go there.

I had left. I escaped miraculously, due to the mad initiative of parents who recognized the importance of getting out, even though their own education and aspiration had been focused on reaching places like Durgapur. Leaving destroyed them professionally, socially and personally, turning them into slightly shocking shadows of their confident and accomplished selves; immigration is not for the middle-aged. But it got the kids off the conveyor belt to nowhere. My friend who died understood that. He once sent me an email in which the only coherent thing was his resentment that I had flown the coop while I was still alive.

So perhaps it's understandable that I associate the place with death: arrivals culminating in necessary departures. I first arrived in Durgapur when my parents stepped off the Coal Field Express on to the platform, my father carrying me in a bassinet. Quite by coincidence, I last saw my father at the same railway station, when he put me on a train bound for Indore. It may very well have been the same platform. The Coal Field passed through before my train pulled in and we said goodbye. Four months later he was dead, alone. I used to take the Coal Field sometimes when I accompanied

my father on his trips to Calcutta. Fish and chips in the dining car, the thrill of the big city and what must be the real world. Lunch at Kwality or cake at Flury's to bribe me into visiting relatives. Temporary getaways.

A lot of this is the neurosis of the emigrant, of course. For most of my friends from Durgapur, the place is mundane. Some have laid to rest the ghosts of engineers' colonies and borrowed time, bought homes and started businesses, made it a hometown like any other. There is even an airport now, although not many flights. But on the two or three occasions that I've gone back, I've been haunted both by the fact that the place has changed, and by the suspicion that it hasn't. Is it even sadder now, or was it always sad? Were the roads always narrow and the buildings a little drab? Had the open spaces that I remembered vanished, or never been there at all? *And I went back to Ohio / But my city was gone.* But the school is still there, with the grimy boys in grey shorts, living in homes that shade into the jungle, studying feverishly to get out. When I had tried to explain to my friend, during our failed attempt to reconnect by email, that I found Durgapur depressing, he had again become enraged: he claimed the place, and I was the condescending NRI. He was too wasted for me to convey that 'going to Durgapur' was like visiting my own grave, charged with the fear of discovering things best forgotten, like dead boys and the holes we come from.

December 4, 2015

Posted by [Satadru Sen](#) at [1:32 PM](#) [Links to this post](#)

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Meat and Murder



Some days ago, in a nondescript village named Dadri in the Indian state of Uttar Pradesh, a mob dragged a blacksmith named Mohammed Akhlaq out of his home and bludgeoned him to death. They also beat his son, leaving him with severe head injuries and possibly brain damage. The “provocation” was a rumor that a cow had been killed in the village for its meat, and the Akhlaqs – one of only two Muslim families in Dadri – has some meat in their freezer. The mob included multiple BJP men and their relatives. Some have been arrested, although trial and conviction are another matter; various high-ups in the party are already clamoring for their release. The meat in the freezer was sent off to a lab to determine if it was in fact beef; the lab has gone mysteriously silent about its findings. Because the incident was both shocking and commonplace ([another lynching](#) has already occurred), it is far from over.

The commonplace character of what happened in Dadri should be readily apparent to those familiar with the politics of lynching in modern India. It has all the usual ingredients: not just religious identity, but caste, class, gender, and the complicity of the state. It’s a Thakur village, the locals sullenly told journalists, as if that explained the murder, and indeed, it provides a part of the explanation. Lynching, along with rape, is an established mechanism of the maintenance of upper-caste dominance in the rural north. It was in a Thakur village, Behmai, that Phoolan Devi was famously gang-raped and paraded naked. In Dadri, as in Behmai, it was a male crowd; such violence is a normative performance of masculine dominance and a reminder that public space in northern India is pathologically homosocial. The perpetrators seem to have come from the demographic that straddles the village and the city in a country that is economically liberalized but ideologically illiberal: cell-phone-toting goons, not poor but viscerally hostile both to the cosmopolitan elite and to the marginal. Typically, the police come from the same classes and show the same inclinations. Days after the killing of Mohammed Akhlaq, a video emerged of a [Dalit family in Dankaur](#) (on the outskirts of Delhi), naked before a milling crowd of cops and onlookers. The family had wanted to report a theft; the police had refused to file a report. Dalit activists claimed the family was stripped and beaten by the police for complaining too much; the police insisted the family had stripped in a voluntary [act of protest](#). The Dadri and Dankaur incidents are “old” phenomena, rooted in patterns of dominance and vulnerability, uppity-ness and punishment, that have marked the informal exercise of power in India for decades. These things happen, as Jyoti Basu once said.

Pointing out that “oldness” has, in fact, been the response of the government and its defenders, confronted with the backlash from liberal intellectuals. Most prominently, forty-odd writers, Sahitya Akademi prize-winners, have returned their awards in protest against the Akademi’s silence in the face of violence and repression, leading the BJP Minister of Culture Mahesh Sharma – whose views on culture are disturbingly reminiscent of Joseph Goebbels – to retort that the protesters expressed no comparable outrage when “these things” happened in the past. Sharma and his ilk have a point, in the sense that Indian liberals have generally treated egregious violations of the rights of minorities as an aberration, albeit a chronic problem, within a nationhood they embraced.

But what the defenders of the regime refuse to acknowledge is that the current situation is also substantially new. The lynching of Akhlaq is one piece of a larger crisis of Indian nationhood, marked by, among other things, the BJP’s energetic efforts to police meat-eating, the murder of the “rationalist” writer M.M. Kalburgi, the banning of Pakistani musicians from Mumbai, the [exclusion of Muslims and Christians](#) from Garba celebrations in Gujarat, and a pattern of silence and vitriol from the government in which the prime minister maintains an icy silence while his underlings and affiliates spew hate (and eventually claim they were misquoted). Indeed, it was Kalburgi’s murder, not Akhlaq’s, that precipitated the current protests; the death of a liberal Hindu and Sahitya Akademi member has miraculously enfolded the death of a Muslim villager. Similarly, the Shiv Sena’s assault on the journalist [Sudheendra Kulkarni](#) – a former BJP man who had refused to back down from promoting a book by a former Pakistani minister – has enfolded and highlighted the relentless drip-drip of hate-crimes against Muslims. Now that Hindutva has reached the stage of devouring its own, its other depredations touch the lives of those who never had occasion to doubt their place in the nation. That package of problems is more or less unprecedented in India, although not in Bangladesh or even Pakistan. And it is that proximity – the realization that India, with its smugness about democratic traditions and constitutional liberties, is now unmistakably [like Bangladesh or Pakistan](#) – that is at the heart of the outrage. The *yeh daag daag ujaala* moment, which came early to Pakistan, is finally, undeniably, India’s moment also.

What appears to be a quixotic and hypocritical protest, targeting a literary association for the failings of the state, is thus increasingly coherent and meaningful. It is not really aimed at the Sahitya Akademi or even its feckless leadership. Everybody – including the government – understands that it is aimed at the state. This is why the police have already begun visiting the protesting writers, asking questions about conspiracies that might have a bearing on “security,” and [harassing journalists](#) who publicize the politics of beef. It is not limited to the state either. Rather, it recognizes that the state is functioning in a mutually sustaining but deniable and [sometimes conflicted](#) partnership with an assortment of reactionary forces, including a section of civil society. It is, in that sense, an unprecedented rebellion against a dispensation that is diffused through Indian society, and the discovery of a “voice” that had been all but lost after the BJP’s victory in the last general election.

The protests are unprecedented because the dispensation itself has no apparent precedent. Indian nationalism has had a powerful reformist element from the outset. From Ram Mohun Roy through Vidyasagar and Vivekananda to Rabindranath, Gandhi, Nehru and Ambedkar, to be Indian was to see moral reevaluation and social reform – sometimes articulated along the lines of the Enlightenment and sometimes in more innovative idioms, but always in terms of an incomplete structure of social justice – as desirable. This provided a way of answering the most basic questions of anti-colonial nationalism in a newly imagined polity – “Who is Indian?” and “What is independence for?” – in ways that were not narrowly ethnic or self-defeating, and it underlay Indian secularism and cosmopolitanism. It was a minority position, and few “reformists” actually married widows, forgot their caste, or told their daughters that careers mattered more than marrying “a suitable boy.” Nevertheless, the premise that nationhood must be transformational outlasted the colonial specter that had long made reformism suspect. It informed the ability of Calcutta-born Bengali-speakers to feel at home in Kerala, Rajasthan and Delhi, the writing of the Indian Constitution, the phenomenon of Nehruvian optimism, and respectable public discourse well beyond Nehru. It may have been inconsistent and internally conflicted, but it was real, the outcome of generations of political and intellectual labor.

The major premises of the new dispensation, on the other hand, deny that reform and social justice are existential concerns of nationhood. One is the Savarkarite formulation that Indianness is ethnic even when it is transregional: when Hindu identity is complete, so is

Indianness. Another is the older idea that reformism is “western” and antithetical to a stable national essence. The third, which particularly suffuses the BJP’s urban, NRI and middle-class supporters, is that they are already reformed and introspection and change are both unnecessary and offensive. The rhetoric of people like Mahesh Sharma and Narendra Modi encapsulates all three premises. Taken together, they amount to a violently exclusionary and majoritarian posture of citizenship.

The triumph of that posture cannot be blamed entirely on the Modi government. It has been nearly thirty years since India did away with *jus soli*, which automatically conferred citizenship upon those born on Indian soil. The new doctrine of inherited citizenship and naturalization at the discretion of the state brought India in line with Margaret Thatcher’s Britain (which also discarded birthright citizenship) and other European countries with strong ethnic anxieties, seeking to keep the *pitrubhumi* safe from Bangladeshi migrants, Pakistani infiltrators and overstaying hippies. (Pakistan, it is worth noting, still has *jus soli*, as a residue of its foundational ideology and English common law.) The Indian intelligentsia accepted it, barely noticing either the amendment of the law or its ideological implications. In doing so, it displayed the timid, shallow, backsliding liberalism of a class that not only lacked confidence, but felt guilty about its place in the national vanguard. Because it remained unconvinced by what it might say in protest, the right to free expression remained compromised and muted for all but those who had recourse to the brute force of majorities and mobs. I am reminded of another writerly spat: Sunil Gangopadhyay refusing to defend Taslima Nasreen, saying “We are not ready for that kind of freedom of speech.” By that fearful logic, “we” are ready for neither independence nor universal suffrage. It is precisely this complicity in repression that set the stage for the predicament of the present time, when membership in the national community is literally a matter of flesh and blood.

In this citizenship of pure and impure DNA, what you eat is intertwined with where you belong, and anything can happen to the impure of mouth and mind. The Chief Minister of Haryana can resort to [dietary intimidation](#), blacksmiths and intellectuals can be murdered, Northeastern women can be sexually victimized in the national capital because they are whores anyway, and Muslim journalists who criticize the dispensation can be abused in the filthiest terms on online forums. Naseeruddin Shah, the most acclaimed actor India has produced, can find himself

under attack for the mildest praise of Pakistan, and must respond that he is a patriot who has never been aware of being Muslim. Shah's response is a nicety of secular-Indian speech, but it is nevertheless true that there *were* contexts in which Indians could forget their "communities." Now those contexts have shrunk dramatically not just for "minorities" and the "sickular," but also for insufficiently pure insiders, as L.K. Advani discovered a few years ago when he was nearly drummed out of the BJP for praising Jinnah, and a blackened Kulkarni (Advani's erstwhile adviser) discovered last week. But this collapsing of the lines between the safe majority and unsafe minorities has made it possible to connect the dots between dead blacksmiths and dead rationalists, naked Dalit women charged with public indecency and middle-class girls assaulted by the Shri Ram Sene for going to a nightclub, embattled thespians of "a certain community" and the embattled liberal arts, the silence of writers and artists clinging to their awards and the silence of the prime minister.

The web of lines connecting the dots holds up the little rebellion of artists and intellectuals. Indians who greeted the election results of 2014 with a phlegmatic refusal to catastrophize, choosing to give the pragmatists and moderates in the dispensation the benefit of the doubt, are less sanguine now; indeed, few would have foreseen how bad things would get, and how quickly. "We" are now one step away from a situation in which boycott, divestment and international isolation would be not only justified but an ethical imperative. It might be said, borrowing a phrase from Zionist discourse, that such a move would "delegitimize" India. But by falling back on an ethnic-majoritarian *raison d'être*, the Indian nation-state has come very close to delegitimizing itself. It is only fitting that this week, the Indian president was in Tel Aviv, telling his hosts that India and Israel are separated twins, united by their love of democracy and diversity. And by increasingly valid questions about legitimacy, he might have added.

For "patriots," a conventional measure of the legitimacy of the nation is the question, "Would you fight for it?" That is no longer a simple question in the Indian case, because what would the patriot be fighting for? An expansive circle of justice, or the squalid vulgarity of the ethnic group? Mohammed Akhlaq had a son in the Indian Air Force, and another who looked forward to joining. Naseeruddin Shah's brother was a general in the Indian Army. When that is not enough to guarantee inclusion in the nation, the nation-state has become indefensible.

The Apotheosis of Alfred Cooke



On September 7 of 1965, as the fighting between India and Pakistan spread beyond Kashmir, a young Indian pilot named [Alfred Cooke](#) found himself in a swirling dogfight over the campus of IIT Kharagpur, near the Kalaikunda air force station. It was the second Pakistani air raid on Kalaikunda that morning. There were two Indian jets versus four Pakistanis, but the Indians got the better of the intruders, and Cooke managed to shoot down one Pakistani plane and damage another. By all accounts, he showed great skill and courage, and fully deserved his Vir Chakra – in fact, he probably deserved a higher award. At the time, however, his action was not seen as especially memorable. Cooke's role in the rest of the war is obscure, and he himself disappeared into obscurity, emigrating to Australia a couple of years later, having retired at the same rank.

Since then, Alfred Cooke has made a remarkable comeback, virtually from the dead. The Kalaikunda dogfight was rediscovered, as it were, by two amateur military historians, Samir Chopra and Jagan Mohan, in their informative book about squadron-level air operations in the 1965 war, published in 2005. Still, not many people took notice: the authors were, for instance, faced with a frustrating indifference on the part of book-review editors. Sections of the book appeared on a website for military fanboys, war-porn aficionados and Hindu nationalists, but outside that small community of self-described 'jingoos,' Cooke remained unknown. That he has now re-emerged as a minor star is quite revealing about the place of history and militarism in Indian national discourse.

The immediate reason for Cooke's newfound stardom is simple. This year being the fiftieth anniversary of the 1965 war, the BJP-led government in New Delhi has decided to 'celebrate India's victory.' The media, eager as ever for a good party, has leapt on board, scraping the barrel for bona fide war heroes. Cooke, now in his mid-seventies and finally discovered, has been brought back from Australia, dusted off and paraded before the television cameras, and a fair multitude of people who have no clue about the politics of the war, know nothing about 'what really happened,' and couldn't tell a Sabre from a 747, are ready to celebrate the return of the native son.

It's a highly Indian phenomenon, for various reasons. Even countries that won unambiguous victories in war don't 'celebrate' them anymore, especially if they're liberal democracies. It's considered poor taste. In Indian democracy, the 'liberal' part died with Nehru and Ambedkar, and the combination of kitsch and melodrama is the national taste. So celebrations are in order. (Jai ho.) But it's also something new, as indicated by the lukewarm reception given to the book by Chopra and Mohan just a decade ago. Military history is not a new genre of literature in India. In the first decades of independence, when the country fought virtually all its wars, several books by retired officers and analysts appeared in print, and some of them – like John Dalvi's *Himalayan Blunder* – were serious and thoughtful works of non-academic history, although one might quarrel with the conclusions. The readership was very small, but that reflected the limited size of the public that was invested in the universal model of the modern nation-state, with its languages of foreign policy, strategy and military tactics. The enthusiasms of this public – which had no illusions about the fact that it lived in a poor and 'backward' country – were appropriately modest, with a minimum of cheerleading and salivating.

A different realism was apparent at the popular level of picturing war: commercial cinema. The war movies (or movies including war) from this earlier period were hopelessly 'unrealistic,' in the sense that they did not try very hard to achieve verisimilitude. The combat footage in Shakti Samanta's *Aradhana*, for instance, is clearly from the Korean War and World War II, or Hollywood movies about those conflicts: the 'Indian' planes have US markings. Samanta was working with an assumption that his middle- and working-class audiences would neither notice nor care

about the use of generic and crudely inserted imagery. War action on screen was meant to *allude* to war, in much the same way that embracing trees in picturesque valleys alluded to romantic/sexual goings-on. Since the audience understood and accepted the allusion, it was real enough.

It can, moreover, be argued that in the 1960s, war itself had a certain reality for Indian consumers of the media, although in a country without conscription or widespread military service, few expected to put on a uniform. It was a mundane, low-level anxiety: the periodic border conflicts put family members in harm's way, and even people who were not well-acquainted with the machines or the tactics knew the routine of pasting over their window-panes. The representation in the media was, accordingly, sentimental rather than glamorous or pornographic.

In the forty-plus years since the Bangladesh War, however, two generations have grown up that have never known war at all, give or take the Kargil clash of 1999. The present-day media market in India is not only much larger than it was in the past, it is qualitatively different: more accustomed to consumption, more sophisticated in its taste for images, hungrier in its visions of power, and less patient with the ignominy of Third World status. It understands, at a level just below the surface of what it will acknowledge, that it inhabits a country whose everyday mode of violence is not the tech-tech contest of missiles and submarines, but the riot with swords, tridents and kerosene cans. So a new combination of the real and the unreal has emerged: the new public wants Top-Gun-like 'realism' in its images and stories of war, but its images and stories are more fantastic than ever.

This combination has given us some extraordinary visuals. In a recent television commercial for a cell phone service provider, a squad of Indian soldiers, looking a bit tired, are supposedly returning from a battle, when one smiling fellow whips out his phone, calls home, and declares "Mom! We won!" It's farcical, but no satire is intended. Kargil was nothing if not a carefully packaged media product, complete with Bollywood starlets and preening TV anchors. Today, virtually the only Indian journalist who provides readable analyses of defense news is [Shekhar Gupta](#). He is outnumbered by fanboys exemplified by Vishnu Som, who ask no difficult questions and only drool at the

machines and warrior-gods, and the greatest number are simply incompetent. Recently, the Indian Army has put out an [eleven-minute recruitment ad](#) that puts the American 'Be all that you can be' campaign to shame, although it is obviously modeled after it. Alfred Cooke, poor man, has been brought back from the underworld by the same frenzied market for military 'glory.'

There is a great deal that is wrong with this picture, including the televised image of Cooke. It cannot be called 'military history' even by the loose standards of popular history. It's actually a kind of anti-history. At the most basic level, by trying to cherry-pick 'success,' it buries the long catalogue of ineptitude that constituted the Indian war effort. Even the action that starred Cooke was marked by incompetence: the Pakistani air raids on the Kalaikunda air base were highly successful, half the Indian planes that were ordered to intercept the second raid failed to engage the attackers, and Cooke's aircraft was armed with the wrong kind of ammunition. It elides S.C. Mamgain, who was Cooke's partner in that fight, turning a two-against-four battle (which was apparently not impressive enough) into a [one-against-four](#) affair. It turns a few short minutes in the life of a twenty-five-year-old into a 'victory' that can stand for, and compensate for, several thousand instances of heroism and absurdity.

More pertinently, it casts the politics of the war into the oblivion of total irrelevance, contributing both to the Indian determination to not talk about Kashmir, and to the nationalist myth of war without politics. It makes it tasteless to ask what factors in Indian society led Anglo-Indians like Cooke to emigrate en masse, even as it turns war into a spectator sport. That latter connection is not new; it's familiar to us from the associations between football and American militarism that Garry Trudeau satirized, not to mention the older British discourse of 'playing the game.' But the Indian maneuver goes a step further: it bypasses the game and goes straight to the victory podium. The story becomes unimportant, even distasteful; only the ending matters, even (especially) when the ending is a public-relations product. In this regard, it replicates what has happened in Indian cricket in recent years, as the flush new market (the same one that consumes the war narratives) has shown its preference for shorter and shorter versions of the game. What the public consumes is victory itself, and it consumes its own consumption – i.e., celebration – of victory. The rest is boring.

That appetite for distilled victory is not benign. The new military ‘history’ is inseparable from the building climate of fascism in India. The craving for heroes who shine above general incompetence, the consumption of technology into pornography, and the total abstraction of war from political and social context are all hallmarks of that fascism, and it occupies precisely the same political and social space as Hindu nationalism. It is not a coincidence that websites that cater to these appetites also harbor the crudest forms of anti-Muslim bigotry, and that their members take time out to pour vitriol on the liberal arts, advocating their abolition and using the rhetoric of treason – plus the terminology of the American far right (‘libtard’, etc.) – to condemn [academics who recently signed a petition](#) against Narendra Modi.

This is a different level of anti-liberalism from the sentimental view of war that existed forty years ago. That older anti-liberalism has been fattened by the market forces that developed in the 1990s, and its sentimentality has been supplemented by the acute abstraction of what is imagined from what is lived. That a large part of the Indian public feels the need to ‘celebrate’ a fifty-year-old ‘victory’ and continues to use the vocabulary of ‘glory’ to describe military action is, at best, a form of ideological immaturity. But it also signifies the deep damage done by colonial subjugation, which has left a violent complex about inferiority and weakness, and by a navel-gazing nationalism that has never ‘won’ adequately because it has not eliminated its existential enemy, which – having been located next door and within – cannot be eliminated without eliminating Indianness itself.

It is politically naïve, in this context, to ‘celebrate’ Alfred Cooke and others like him, and to cast the celebration as an act of historical memory. It’s like celebrating American pilots who achieved ‘victories’ in Vietnam. Who celebrates Charles Hartman and Clinton Johnson, although there too, fifty years have passed? Such celebrations would be regarded as absurd, outside fringe communities of military enthusiasts. They would be absurd not because Vietnam was a ‘bad’ war and the Indo-Pak war a ‘good’ one, but because American society has developed ways of talking about war – debate, protest, criticism, analysis, retrospective vision – that, however imperfect, enable meaningful judgments of ‘good’ and ‘bad,’ and ensure that the memory of war is not the preserve of ‘jingoos’ alone. There are serious, thoughtful histories of the Vietnam War that make it impossible to mistake Rambo for the real thing for very long. In India, without such histories to provide context, pose hard questions and generate introspection,

remembering and recording the exploits of individuals like Cooke becomes fodder for the anti-liberal politics of the day.

Stories like Cooke's should not, however, be dismissed as unimportant. Critics of militarism and 'macho nationhood' must understand that these are attractive stories: that there is indeed something appealing about the narrative of a young pilot who fights off multiple enemies, lands, has to be lifted from the cockpit because his body has gone limp, and can barely remember his experience, leaving gun-camera footage to fill in the blanks in his memory. That appeal is central to the erotics of nationalism and citizenship; the male citizen is normatively a military fanboy. Moreover, the Indian nation-state is a particular kind of modern community: a democracy that dispensed early with liberalism, preferring authoritarianism and technocracy as its dominant ethos. Its elites have long been enamored of war, but rarely deviated from the arc between sentimentality and self-pleasuring fantasy. In that setting, the rhetoric of 'victory' and 'glory' is especially pernicious: there is something reckless and intoxicated about it that resembles but exceeds the notorious 'innocence' of American militarism. The clearest danger it poses is not the threat of war, but that of normalizing illiberal democracy, with its visions of traitors, fifth columns, sabotaged majorities and uniformed chains of command. It becomes particularly important, then, to be mindful of the company stories keep, and to compensate actively for the guilty pleasures of celebrating victory, beginning with recognizing it as a guilty pleasure.

There is, obviously, no such thing as innocent military history – or innocent history of any kind – in the modern age, when national communities immediately claim and use that history for their own purposes. The insistence on innocence is itself a political position. Telling war stories as a feel-good exercise is like telling police stories (which also have their share of heroics and sacrifice, and their constituencies of police fans and families) without talking about the politics of policing: it invariably becomes a reactionary exercise. One must, in those circumstances, inquire about the purposes and tactics of remembering the particulars of war.

I want to end, therefore, with a suggestion for how the story of Alfred Cooke can be remembered without conceding it to fascism. Cooke and other Anglo-Indians in the air

force (there were many) had to deal with the racism of their ‘authentically Indian’ fellow-officers, who did not always try very hard to hide their contempt for what they saw as the low-born bastards of empire. That racism, while not as devastating as what Muslims have faced, was a semi-acknowledged fact of life in independent India, and it was closely related to the majoritarian understanding of Indianness. It left a guilty trace in the movies (Satyajit Ray’s *Mahanagar*, K.S. Sethumadhavan’s *Julie*, Aparna Sen’s *36 Chowringhee Lane*), and in the sizeable community of Anglo-Indian ex-IAF officers in Australia (who have traded one marginal condition for another). The way to remember Cooke is to tell his story – and that of other ‘celebrated’ Anglo-Indians from 1965, such as Pete Wilson and the Keelor brothers – in the context of that part of the modern Indian experience, alongside the stories of exclusion, discrimination, early retirement and emigration.

That contextualization would be resisted immediately as ‘divisive’, ‘parochial’ and ‘communal’ by the majoritarians who insist upon the fantasy of undivided nationality (the familiar ‘don’t call them Anglo-Indian officers, they’re simply Indian officers’ objection) even as they exclude and discriminate, in order to delegitimize minorities who complain or organize. But for that reason alone, it would restore soldiers – who, like athletes, are supposedly ‘above politics’ – to politics, forcing the recognition that the innocence of heroism is already political. It would, in the process, withhold a powerful piece of historical memory from the forces that drive the very real fascist predicament in India today, and place military history in the service of justice and a livable nationhood.

September 21, 2015

Posted by [Satadru Sen](#) at [10:55 AM](#) [Links to this post](#)

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The National Shit

Recently, I had the opportunity to peer-review an article on the politics of shit in India. It was a fine contribution; I recommended that it be published, and it will, presumably, appear in print at some point in the near future. The author sought to make some connections between the phenomenon of outdoor defecation in India, and the inequalities of caste, arguing, more or less, that Indian attitudes towards shit reflect the extreme exclusions faced by communities that have traditionally been associated with ‘unclean’ tasks. I was persuaded by the arguments, but found myself thinking more broadly about Indian shit.

The politics of Indians’ defecation is not *only* about caste; it is about nationhood itself. Not surprisingly, when non-Indians have thought about India in the past, they have sometimes felt compelled to talk shit: Katherine Mayo, Günter Grass, V.S. Naipaul, and various others. Indeed, ‘where Indians defecate’ has entered global public discourse: whenever there is a demonstration of Indian national prowess, such as the ISRO Mars mission, the comments sections of foreign news sites mushroom with reproaches about wasting money on rockets when half your population shits in the open. This has become one of those things that even (or rather, especially) people who couldn’t place India on a map are confident about. Over the past year, the government of Prime Minister Narendra Modi has itself played a leading role in highlighting the toilet issue, trumpeting the cause of “Swachh Bharat” (Clean India) and urging ministers, actors, athletes and other prominent citizens to pose with brooms before the television cameras. These well-heeled *jharuwallas* are, of course, quite aware that Swachh Bharat will not come anytime soon, and are not overly bothered.

That leaves us with a few questions that I would like to address very briefly. One concerns the persistent popularity of the subject of Indian defecation. Here there is a difference between the ‘foreign’ and ‘native’ discourses. The foreign narrative is either aggressively colonial, or, in a variation, nervously defensive. It emerged in the 1920s, precisely when the Montagu-Chelmsford reforms had given Indian politicians a measure of control over the lower levels of the government of the country. Talk of filth functioned, in this context, as a nullification of this self-government: natives were clearly incapable of running the machinery of administration. In

the period after 1947, as Nehru and the Jadavpur/IIT generations made machinery (literally) a new basis of Indian civilization, missing toilets became a technological counterthrust: a way of putting upstarts in their place, and shoring up increasingly precarious distinctions and hierarchies between the natures of whites and natives. Dams and spacecraft swirled into the hole of the absent toilet, giving the lie to their own existence. Just as importantly, they left behind a moral stench, because the accusation was not simply about missing latrines, but about deluded self-indulgence: the refusal to take care of one's own, preferring Martians to peasants.

The Indian narratives are more complex and interesting. They emerged in the second half of the nineteenth century, in two contexts that remained resolutely separate: the formulation of the middle-class family, and municipal sanitation. In the first, the polemics of cleanliness came largely from people who identified themselves as conservatives, and sought to articulate a ritual purity, in the literal sense of *rituals of purity*, that could be contrasted with the impurity and unhealthiness of a colonized public sphere. This meant elaborate instructions on how to defecate (do not linger, do not talk, try to avoid sniffing) and how to wash up afterwards (use ashes, not soap). Some of these same men became interested in what Benoy Kumar Sarkar later called 'mistrification,' or the cultivation of a mechanically adept subjectivity across the classes: respectable men who possessed, and were not afraid to use, the tools of home repair, and who displayed what became an elusive grail of Indian nationalism: 'scientific spirit.' The householder, conceivably, could be his own mistry, plumber and even janitor. Such schemes enjoyed a glimmer of popularity during the National Education project associated with the Swadeshi movement, but then faded almost entirely.

Municipal action, on the other hand, touched upon shit only in the context of disease-control, and even then very gingerly. Without the pressure of cholera, and sometimes even then, public shit remained somebody else's problem, because the public defecator was reliably somebody else, and 'the public' not much more than an occasionally useful abstraction. It was only when Gandhi began holding up latrine democracy in his communes as the metaphor of a new public life, and pointing his finger at *how* the respectable continued to shit in their own homes (not very cleanly at all), that some connecting threads began to appear: between the communal latrine and the bathroom, between the toilet and the temple, between caste justice and

democracy. These threads were, of course, by and large brushed away with the rest of Gandhi's agenda of social reorganization.

They are now, apparently, being picked up again by the Modi regime, but these are of course not the same threads. They are at once a charade and a distortion, first because they are not accompanied by an agenda of economic and caste justice, second because they constitute an empty gesture of purposeful statecraft that is itself sinister, and third because they mistake public toilets for a public habit. An important part of the BJP's support base, including the prime minister himself, is openly enamored of the cleanliness of places like Singapore and leaders like Lee Kuan Yew. This is not a new trend in Indian nationalist discourse; the longing for a strong leader who will clean things up in the name of the state goes back at least as far as the 1920s. Since Indian political realities have stubbornly refused to either accommodate or legitimize that kind of state or elite action, the interventions have typically been sporadic, illicit or theatrical: pogroms, the Emergency, and less malignantly, Swachh Bharat. None have solved the problem of filth in Indian society, except in terms of providing a transient satisfaction to those who understand the connections between cleanness and power.

One of the laudable things about the Swachh Bharat program is that it has included the actual building of latrines: both public facilities and home toilets. (In the later case, it has carried forward an initiative which actually began under the previous government.) The problem, as everyone involved in these projects knows, is not only that proudly-built sewage lines terminate in rivers and on beaches (Indian municipal sanitation is largely about moving the stink downwind), but also that even when the toilets are made available, Indians continue to prefer the great outdoors when nature calls. There is a practical side to this perversity. Private homes often have a premium on space, and cannot spare a room for the bowels. Anybody who has visited a public toilet in India – in a bus station or on a train, for instance – knows that these are extensions of hell, best avoided. Words fail the user; there is no need to proscribe talking. Even facilities that the middle class (would rather not) use, such as school toilets, inspire a dread that must be smelled to be believed; boys at the most respectable schools shit in their pants rather than venture into the latrine. Nowhere is there an assurance of soap and water, let alone ashes. No institution, government or private, invests anything substantial in training or compensating those who are charged with cleaning public toilets, and such staff – where they exist – are

treated with the dual contempt that is reserved in India for the low-caste and poor, who, in their undernourished skins and dirty uniforms, function as a race apart. For them, indifference to their assigned tasks becomes a perfectly reasonable form of resistance.

Practicality, however, is only part of the problem of Indian toilets, and it is of course not distinct from ideology and politics. It can hardly be denied that for many Indians, the toilet itself is inherently unclean, something to avoid and banish from the home. And even middle class householders make themselves at home with - but not in - dank, slippery, roach-infested bathrooms that are a sort of afterthought to domesticity. While caste prejudices have something to do with this, much of it is connected to a compartmentalized tolerance of filth, and patterns of urban dirtiness we would recognize in the fairly recent history of the European city, where people might simply pitch their shit out the window with a warning shout of “Gardylloo!” These are the habits of urban peasantry, who became ‘civilized’ in Europe partly through the mitigation of extreme poverty, and partly through absorption into the more or less horizontal community of the national population.

In India, where poverty remained romanticized as ‘authentic’ but nationhood remained fundamentally vanguardist, there was no corresponding mass de-peasantification. The most glaring failure, I would suggest, came in the area of primary education. When Nehru and his colleagues declined to prioritize public education, they neglected a basic function of the nationalizing project of the modern state, which is the transformation of habit into the stuff of historical agency. In this project, compulsion is as automatically legitimate as nationhood itself, and the refusal of the Indian state to enforce compulsory education was the abdication of a power that is prized in the rhetoric of the left as well as the right. “There must be compulsion,” Benoy Sarkar had remarked about urban governance, without feeling he was being anti-democratic or illiberal. The modern citizen – the fascist as well as the liberal – will shit right only if subjected to a measure of compulsion; toilet-training is a part of what Norbert Elias saw as the civilizing process both within and without the family. Bentham's invisible guard must of course be internalized, but the little savages must first be hauled into the circles of civilization.

Relatively few Indian children attended school consistently. Those who did, learned to hold it in. Yet it is children who are not afraid to shit at school that recoil from the prospect of public defecation, and it is those who have been trained to regard brooms and plungers as ordinary implements that do not shrink from toilets and janitors. In India, where such people are mainly fantastic, the failure to compel children to go to school is intertwined with the resounding refusal of the national elites to teach *themselves* the value of working with tools. The Indian model of development produced, ironically, a nation of engineers who disdain mechanical proficiency and regard mechanics as dirty, but see dirt as both normal and external to themselves. They take it for granted but refuse to own it, holding their noses, as it were. Disgust with and tolerance of shit – the unpleasant bathroom that one uses but does not inhabit – then undergirds a national habit, producing, among other things, a rhetoric of cleansing power that is itself a discursive habit of *ressentiment* nationalism. But development is first and foremost the building of habits that can sustain and be sustained by infrastructure. It is, consequently, in the arena of habit that India continues to be a grossly underdeveloped nation.

September 4, 2015

On Self-Hate and Romance

In the latter part of the 1980s, as Rajiv Gandhi's honeymoon with the voters who had given him a thumping majority in Parliament came to an end, people began muttering about alternative leadership. Some names were muttered more than others. One was V.P. Singh, who in fact became the next PM. Another was Arif Mohammed Khan, the dissident Congressman who had opposed the government's handling of the Shah Bano affair and resigned soon afterwards. Arif was (and remains) a Muslim, of course, and for that reason few took him seriously as a prime ministerial candidate. He later joined the BJP. But in that moment, when the Congress – internally eroded by Mrs. Indira Gandhi – was showing its weakness, various Indian politicians who had no nationwide base became viable contenders for the top job: not only V.P. Singh, but also

Chandra Shekhar, Inder Gujral, H.D. Deve Gowda and Narasimha Rao. Arif's religious identity, which made him an unlikely candidate, also gave him a certain romantic appeal, quite apart from his reputation as a man of conscience in a cynical capital. I want to suggest that although it came to nothing – his political career went downhill – Arif's brief moment in the sun reflects a strain of Hindu self-hate that is worthy of recuperation.

The romance of the Muslim is both an unlikely and a resilient part of Indian nationhood. The cultural history of the republic is littered with it, from *Mughal-e-Azam*, through the cricket captaincy of Pataudi, to the popularity of A.P.J. Abdul Kalam at the height of the Hindutva wave. It may be argued that Akbar, Pataudi and Abdul Kalam were all “safe” or “palatable” Muslims: one dead, one secular-debonair, and one a missile scientist. They did not hold forth on unpleasant subjects like police brutality or [discrimination in housing and employment](#). But the fact remains that they were also quite different types, and the nationalist imagination had room for them all. Had Abdul Kalam been a Hindu, he would have been a rather ordinary figure. But a Muslim president who wrote poetry about nuclear weapons and presided over a BJP administration was, well, romantic. It was as if the historical project of national purging, or Muslim-exclusion, had unexpectedly unearthed – even produced – a miracle of inclusion. The novelist Anita Desai recognized the dynamic in *Clear Light of Day*, which is probably her best work: as the Partition takes its bloody course, the bed-ridden Hindu poet Raja fumes at the ongoing attacks on Muslims, pens derivative *shairi* and fantasizes about heroic feats of rescue. Desai is somewhat unkind to Raja, who “saves” (marries) a Muslim neighbor with a rich father and becomes rich and fat in consequence. Nevertheless, the self-indulgence of his heroism and bad poetry do not altogether efface a particular type of romantic majority-subjectivity that is very much a part of Indian nationalism. As much as Indian secularism, from which it is not fully distinct, its most basic function is the rescue and protection of the religious minority – specifically, Muslims – from the dangerous margins of majoritarian nationhood.

In general, romantic nationalism is an artifact and instrument of the right; our understanding of the phenomenon is inextricably bound with the histories of European fascism. But it would be more accurate to say that all nationalism is romantic: sooner or later, even the most drily civic and liberal nations acquire fuzzy, feel-good mythologies in which liberalism itself becomes a romance and a bloodline. Romance is both a necessity and a danger within nationalist projects, sustaining the community by making the exclusion of outsiders a source of pleasure. Indian majoritarianism (and indeed, the Pakistani and Bangladeshi) indicates, however, that alongside this exclusive “mainstream,” with its erotics of violence and demonization, there is a romance of inclusion which produces alternative communities in which majoritarian considerations are not so much set aside as differently deployed, often by the same people who subscribe to the more conventional constructions of identity and nationhood. Simultaneously normative and deviant, these other romances are redemptive possibilities within majoritarian democracy.

That redemption is most readily visible in the movies. Indian popular cinema retains a small but powerful and resilient niche for narratives of Muslim-inclusion: *Mughal-e-Azam*, *Jodhaa Akbar*, *Bombay*, *Pinjar*, *Veer Zaara*, and so on. These are very different films. *Mughal-e-Azam* invited the audience to identify with protagonists who were largely Muslims. It succeeded at least partly because Akbar’s status as the patron-emperor of Indian unity meshed with the Nehruvian secular ethos, allowing a momentary nostalgia for Mughal Hindustan. Since then, secularism has acquired the “pseudo” prefix and Akbar has become a marginal icon (streets and jumbo jets are no longer named after him), needing a Rajput princess to capture the sympathy of Hindu cinema-goers. But the films continue to articulate fantastic desires for union or reunion, or an alternative/hybrid Indian self that not only admits the greatest possible intimacy between Hindus and Muslims, but that spotlights the menace of pure selves. In this recuperation of a self that is “both,” there is the modern promise of a secular Indianness that arches over communal identities, as well as a residue of older, un-partitioned maps and imaginations. Each is a romance of a nationhood that may never have existed, but

that is nevertheless experienced as both lost and real. It exists as a ghost ideology, or a recurring dream to which even fascists are susceptible.

This brings me back to Arif Mohammed Khan and Muslims in the BJP. Quite apart from the big names – Najma Heptulla, M.J. Akbar and others – some three million Muslims have joined the party this year alone. It is not difficult to understand why Muslims might join an overtly anti-Muslim party. The reasons are entirely prosaic: affiliation brings a measure of security and patronage. There is also the nature of the BJP, which is not *just* an anti-Muslim organization. It is increasingly taking the place of the Congress as India's "big tent" political party. It is possible, given the right incentives, to overlook the more rabid expressions of Hindutva and focus on other things.

It is harder to gauge the effect of Muslim participation on the BJP. In theory, small numbers of Muslims function as a fig leaf, giving the party the respectability of a secular veneer. In practice, however, even modest numbers of Muslim politicians and voters function as brakes on the chariot: every vote counts in a tight election, and the hate-speech must be tamped down to give spin doctors like M.J. Akbar something to work with. Just as importantly, it reflects and strengthens a political and ideological environment in which respectability comes from inclusion, and the realism of the minority is tied up with the romantic imagination of the majority. This is why the presence of Muslims in the BJP is qualitatively different from a hypothetical situation in which Jews join the NSDAP, and even the participation of Palestinians in Zionist parties. No Arab politician could be a spokesman for Likud in the way that M.J. Akbar can be the spokesman of the BJP.

It can be argued that the Muslim who joins or votes for the BJP exhibits a form of self-hate. But what is self-hate? If we consider the modern Jewish concept of the self-hating subject, it is immediately evident that there are two, intertwined, forms of this perversion. One is the angst of Herzl's "new Jew," who remained insecure about his distance from the "old Jew," who he saw much as gentiles did: stunted, weak, cringing, easily murdered, unenlightened, Oriental, and so on. The other is the treason of the Jew

who refuses to align uncritically with Zionism. Among Indian Muslims, something akin to the first variety can be glimpsed in Syed Ahmed Khan's remark that compared to the English, his compatriots were dirty animals. The second variety would materialize later, in the post-1937 Muslim League narrative of Congress Muslims. Ironically, in independent India, a diluted version of that second criticism has been adopted by the secular left and aimed at BJP Muslims. But generally speaking, Indo-Muslim self-hate has migrated to Pakistan and more problematically, to Bangladesh, where like Hindutva (with its contempt for the "pseudo-secular" Indian and obsession with "appeasement"), a reformulated Two-Nation Theory can thrive on epithets pinned on critics of the unfettered power of the majority.

Self-hate in Indian nationalism is primarily a phenomenon of the modern Hindu who loathes what he sees as the historical weakness of his compatriots: their indiscipline, effeminacy, cowardice, fatalism, servility, softness, excessive spirituality, military incompetence, indifference to the hard requirements of the material world, and reluctance to embrace the prerogatives of the majority on its own land. The Hindu right's hatred of Gandhi, Faisal Devji pointed out, was rooted in the perception that he practiced a politics of minority activism: coming out of South Africa, where Indians were a minority, Gandhi never made the switch to majoritarianism. Indeed, it may be accurate to say that modern self-hate is intertwined not so much with fear of a particular minority as with fear of minority-ness, or the minority condition in the scheme of popular sovereignty.

At the same time, it is readily apparent that the rhetoric of self-hate secretes a series of fractures within the modern self. The separation between the hater and the hated remains unreliable. Moreover, the barb can be – and is – flung in either direction across the left-right divide, with each side accusing the other of being self-hating, and not without justification. (It is not a coincidence that in Indian politics, the charge of having strayed from secularism is a weapon of the right as well as the left.) Self-hate is, in fact, ubiquitous in nationalism. It reflects not so much a disavowal of communal identity, as a refusal or failure to be sealed within it. From the standpoint of justice, the

acceptance of identity is as important as the ambivalence towards it, because it undergirds a responsibility that is otherwise diluted to homeopathic proportions within liberal-secular universalism. It is the combination of acceptance and refusal/failure that produces cosmopolitanism, and more specifically, the cosmopolitan citizenship that makes calculations of majority and minority contingent and fascists apoplectic. There is something salutary about it, and I am entirely in agreement with Mike Marqusee's remark that people without a measure of self-hate are not to be trusted. It is precisely those nationalities that have been pushed by historical circumstances into hating themselves a little – Germans, the Japanese – that have produced the more encouraging examples of non-militaristic nationhood.

In South Asia, the liberal form of secularism has not worked very well: that much, I think, is apparent to liberals as well as to those who do not care much for liberalism. Various romances have flourished instead: those of Syed Ahmed Khan, Bankim, Iqbal, Savarkar. Typically, the authors of these romances have urged their co-nationalists to remember: to remember Mahmud and Somnath, Shivaji and Aurangzeb, Punjab in 1947 and Bangladesh in 1971, Saurabh Kalia and Papa II, and so on. But people also tend to forget, and what we see in India's cinema of the intimate Muslim is a desire to forget, which is inseparable from the urge to conjure up mythical tales of Akbar-and-Jodhabai, and a self that has overflowed its communal boundaries. In Mani Ratnam's *Bombay*, the frantic father searching for his children in the middle of a riot shouts that he is neither a Hindu nor a Muslim, only an Indian. To describe that desire as secular is to strip it of its meaning and power, because what it really is, is romantic. Self-hate, in other words, is as much about forgetting as about remembering, and where memory has been harnessed to the power and violence of the nation, forgetting functions as an intimate form of resistance to the hegemonic ideology. It generates unexpected variations on nationalist iconography. In Yash Chopra's *Veer Zaara* – an utterly mainstream product and one of the most commercially successful Hindi films ever – the standard heroic figure of the uniformed warrior swaggers into the frame in the decidedly non-violent form of a rescue pilot in an unarmed helicopter, and even he resigns his IAF commission midway into the movie. Our self-hating Squadron Leader is no Top Gun.

When the liberal foundations of secular citizenship are weak, as they are in India, the bases of tolerance and minority rights have to be sought within majoritarian nationalism itself. Forgetful desire is not, of course, a reliable means of justice. Modern states are by definition creatures of memory-making and record-keeping, and it is at best naïve to believe that the Indian state (or the Pakistani or the Bangladeshi) will wither away, leaving happily devolved communities of Gandhians and Nandians. The building and maintenance of secular-liberal institutions and the production and dissemination of histories that are not recycled Orientalist fables remains essential, even as we acknowledge that these will remain embattled in their existence and compromised in their operation. But it is also important to see that such institutions, which may be resented by the illiberal nationalist, can complement the unreliable boundaries of self-hating subjectivity, and that majoritarian romance is a resource that deserves to be taken seriously and better utilized in everyday discourse and practice. What makes the romantic fiction of Indian secularism hopeless also keeps it alive.

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Beyond the Settler-Colonial Paradigm

Thinking Futures conference, Port Blair, 4-5 December 2014

Satadru Sen (City University of New York)

In Munich last year, I attended a conference on the Andamans. Several of you were there also. There were, of course, no Andamanese present. So we ended up in a rather old-fashioned ritual of talking *about* so-called primitive people who are acknowledged to be alive, but for whom self-representation would be unnatural.

The situation is not too different here in Port Blair. I don't mean that the organizers should have brought a couple of Jarawas or an Onge to make a token appearance. But nearly seventy years after independence, we should have been able to have a Jarawa or an Onge appear at a conference like this on their own initiative, to speak as their own agents. That these expectations seem unrealistic is not too different from Victorians scoffing at the prospect of natives with Ph.Ds. It is a sign that something is not right.

Since I'm critiquing the very concept of the primitive tribe, let me bore you for a minute with the history of primitiveness. Primitivism refers broadly to the Western fascination with the idea of 'the primitive,' manifested primarily in non-Western societies but also secondarily within the West itself. As a 'movement' that emerged in Europe in the eighteenth century, it developed a particularly close relationship with the politics of imperialism. It reflected, on the one hand, the confident new realities of racism and colonialism, and on the other hand, a growing disenchantment with the Enlightenment, an affected rejection of modernity, and a pessimism about the permanence of 'civilization' and its racial order.

At the most readily apparent level, this was an oppositional relationship: the primitiveness ascribed to newly discovered people underscored the modernity to which the civilized were attached. At the same time, primitivism became part of a complex relationship of objectification.

To be modern and civilized was also to consume the primitive aesthetically, scientifically and economically.

Nineteenth-century primitivism was simultaneously appreciative, contemptuous and ‘objective’ in its outlook on what it consumed. It was appreciative in the sense that it was closely intertwined with Romanticism, in which the alien, primitive and dying became desirable counterparts to the competitive, utilitarian and thriving West. This desire marks the growing appetite in Western markets for ‘primitive’ arts and artifacts, either collected in colonial locations or fashioned in the West itself. By the end of the century, the Andamans had been integrated into this pattern, with the aggressive collection of artifacts and photographs that showcased pacified savages producing what Europeans perceived as an authentic pre-industrial harmony, beauty and genius.

Yet primitivism was contemptuous in the assumption that modernity possessed a higher value than what was appreciated as primitive. And it was objective in the sense that it bestowed its aficionados with the equanimity of the scientist or the curator rather than the zeal of the conquistador. Primitive people existed to be studied, as clues to the nature of humanity and living fossils that would not long survive the triumph of a civilization equipped with battleships and capitalism. For evolutionist anthropologists in particular, the savage or primitive contemporary, once a menacing proposition, now became synonymous with frailty, death and extinction – a discourse which has dominated the narrative of the Andamanese since the 1880s.

M.V. Portman explicitly described the Andamanese as a chemistry experiment in its final stages, and the islands as a laboratory of natural history: a substance that had long existed in the vacuum of insulation, he argued, was violently dematerializing at the touch of air. It was sad but exciting, an insight into the primordial nature of mortality. The death-by-demoralization hypothesis has never gone away: much of our present-day idea of the Andamanese as a doomed people flows from the notion that primitive people confronted by modernity become so demoralized that they die.

In turn-of-the-century Europe, the morbid savage had an important variation: in anthropology-inspired popular literature like Conrad's *Heart of Darkness*, the primitive threatened to infiltrate Europe itself, or to show itself as having been there all along. This valorization of a primitive mode within whiteness was not benign. Most straightforwardly, it encouraged casual violence against native people. In settler colonies like Australia, the historian Patrick Wolfe has pointed out, the indigenous population was superfluous to the social, political and economic order. And even in colonies where indigenous labor was a rational requirement, Michael Taussig has suggested, primitivism generated irrational excesses of violence and terror. Colonizers appropriated the apparent primitiveness of aborigines and deployed it against them, killing them without constraints. I don't need to remind anybody here about the violence visited on the Andamanese tribes from the moment the HMS Viper sailed into these waters: the shootings, kidnappings, flogging, forced labor, exhibitions, etc. The primitiveness ascribed to the native justified 'uncivilized' conduct by the civilized: not only had the native invited the violence visited upon him, his 'obsolete' condition suggested that he was already extinct, and killing him not especially damning.

How much of this history can be applied to independent India – a nation of natives with natives, so to speak? The answers are a mixed bag. An interest in the primitive is certainly discernible within Indian nationalist narratives, but much of the time, the primitive was identified with the roots of the Self, but not placed in direct opposition to the modern Self. It was neither valorized nor denigrated for its primitiveness: the Indian-nationalist tendency has been to highlight how modern its ancestors were, but at the same time, to assign to it a higher moral value than the colonized and degraded present.

The Adivasi model of aboriginality was invented to fit this frame, but it was an uneasy fit, because quite early on, the nationally-oriented class conceived them partly through the lens of European primitivism. And certainly, within a nationalism articulated by upper-caste Hindus, the Adivasi was racialized to some extent. But for a couple of reasons, this was a limited Othering. One is that Indian nationalist discourse quickly found a niche for the non-Aryan *within* the national geography and the national Self: by the early twentieth century, the liberal wing of Indian nationalism – the Tagore family, for instance – had decisively adopted the Adivasi as a pristine repository of Indian culture, and even Hindu-nationalist ideologues like Savarkar were emphasizing an *Indian* race from which Adivasis were not separate. And certainly if we were to look below the layer of elite nationalism, to the lower-caste world of mofussil towns and villages, the Adivasi was only semi-distinct, with no sharp line between the world of the tribal and that of the peasant.

The other is that by the time the Tagores were patronizing the incorporation of Santals and Mundas into the national body as art, folklore and even history, there already existed a politics of

Adivasi self-assertion. I don't mean the hools and rebellions beloved of Subalternist historians. I mean the work of politicians like Jaipal Singh, which brought Adivasis into active and participatory roles in the national mainstream. They entered wearing primitiveness like a contextual badge of identity that was not essentially different from other modern identities. It was, however imperfectly, a self-directed, negotiated and modern union with Indianness, premised more on similarity and equality than on difference and inferiority. It provides, in fact, a model of self-representation that could be quite useful to projects like a tribal museum in the Andamans.

But these maneuvers were premised on the near-total absence of a discourse of superfluity. The absence was, on the one hand, part and parcel of exploitation in Indian society: as with blacks in apartheid South Africa, there was space for tribal people because there was a need for their labor. But on the other hand, it remained possible for those designated as Adivasis to contest oppression politically, socially and even culturally. In other words, there was space for them as living people even when there was no obvious need for them as Santals or Gonds.

The South African parallel is actually quite instructive. Wolfe pointed out recently that apartheid was not based on a fantasy that entire groups of people would cease to exist. It was oppressive and appropriative, but there is something worse, which we see in settler-colonial situations where there is no conceptual, political or actual space for the aborigine.

We have come close to that in the Andamans. After independence, several things have happened in tandem to make the situation *more* settler-colonial than before. One is, of course, the

accelerated migration from the Indian mainland. Unlike convicts, the migrants have become a politically mobilized demographic, able to approach the state with their claims on local resources. The peculiar status of the tribal population, in which they are *normatively* limited to a shrinking patch of jungle instead of being located in a wider society and geography, has only encouraged settlers to regard them as superfluous people taking up space. The other is that the administration has remained in the hands of people invested in the primitive. This investment is itself partly an inheritance of colonial discourses of race, and partly an organic response to the peculiar political and professional opportunities present in the combination of managerialism and democracy, in which some people are managed and others demand representation.

The continuing primitive status of the Andamanese has thus become a fundamental aspect of the insular quality of the Andamans: these are islands in India, and the Andamanese are islands within Indianness. I cannot emphasize this enough: insulation produces primitivism, and primitivism is for the dead, not the living. The Andamanese have become progressively insular, as growing numbers of Indians have become infected by the primitivist vision of the state-affiliated managers of the tribal population. So whereas tribals on the mainland have lost their status as objects of ethnography, the Andamanese have become reified in their ethnographic condition. Middle-class, urban Indians no longer fantasize about going into the jungle to see Santals, although there was a historical and cultural moment when they did – I'm thinking of Satyajit Ray's film *Aranyer Din Ratri*. I don't think it's stretching it too far to say that this is partly because eastern Bihar, where modern Bengalis used to go to see tribals, is now a tribal state, with a tribal chief minister. It's become a part of the prosaic mainland of Indian politics.

Instead, Indians now want to go on safaris in the Jarawa reserve, to see the last primitives in the national zoo.

Obviously, the Adivasi politics of the mainland did not take hold in the Andamans, and this failure has come at great cost to the Andamanese, who have been consigned to a protected innocence – life without politics – that deprives them of agency, representation and life itself. And enforced primitiveness will continue to fail as a policy, because the modern genie cannot be put back in the bottle: we cannot undo the history of the past two hundred and twenty years. We cannot even close the Andaman Trunk Road. And frankly, I am not convinced that the ATR *should* be closed. It is the historical norm that people will move about and interact, even if the interaction is not on equal terms. It is segregation that is coercive and extraordinary, and it doesn't work.

So the question is, what would work? To begin to answer that question, we have to decide what 'work' means in this context. If it means clinging to a romantic preservationism, i.e., fetishizing an inflexible, anti-historical idea of what it means to be an aborigine, then that work will amount to little more than liberal hand-wringing. It will be an extended funeral, not only for people, but for an unsustainable ideal of racial and cultural purity. It will mean making films about the dying in anticipation of their death, and I think film-makers who work on the Andamanese must think very carefully about why they are making their films. Are they documenting a way of life, or a way of death?

For the answer to be ‘life,’ ‘work’ will have to mean a form of assimilationism. You cannot live in a modern state and reject assimilation altogether without placing yourself at a terrible disadvantage. It is only the assimilated who can resist effectively, and who can re-articulate their identity. But assimilationism can mean many things. It can mean, for instance, the total deregulation of contact. I don’t think we can really predict what would happen under those circumstances: it is possible that the Andamanese would quickly lose their land and be absorbed into a laboring underclass. Would this be a bad thing? Well, yes, in the sense that economic exploitation is a bad thing, but the exploitation of the Jarawa would not be a worse thing than the exploitation of the Santal, or of the non-tribal poor, for that matter. If we assume that it would be a bigger tragedy, we fall into the primitivist trap, and take the Andamanese with us.

But total deregulation is not the only available form of assimilationism. The most reasonable approach, I think, would be a minimalist one that protects the tribal reserve, guaranteeing the exclusive ownership of its land to the tribal group. But what the members of the tribe do on that land should be absolutely up to them. If they want to meet tourists or filmmakers, that should be their business. If they want to leave, return, start a business, marry a Tamil, or download pornography on their phones, that should be their business. Beyond ensuring their ownership of the reserve, the state and civil society organizations should make certain options available to them: schools, dispensaries, access to the economy in the form of jobs and micro-finance, access to the courts, access to information, voting rights, the ability to travel, the ability to become unrecognizable to those who are invested in the primitive. Information must be a two-way flow, not only must we learn about the tribes, but the tribes must know what options are available to them through the Indian state and society.

By way of an ideological framework, I want to mention something Partha Chatterjee once wrote about the Muslim Civil Code. The individual member of the minority group, he wrote, must have the option of functioning as a generic rights-bearing citizen, without giving up his or her minority identity. The state must protect both options: the generic as well as the particular. It might be argued that the Jarawa and Onge are not like Muslims or even Adivasis, that they are extraordinarily vulnerable. But this perception of extraordinariness is the problem. The so-called primitive groups have to be allowed to be ordinary. It is ordinariness that must be facilitated by well-wishers of the Andamanese: ordinary resources, ordinary identities, ordinary constitutional status.

This facilitation need not be an abstract or exotic concept. It can follow the standard model of Indian federalism, in which there is no contradiction between a particular identity (like being Bengali) and the generic identity (being Indian). The state can take unremarkable, practical steps to make this possible, such as teaching Andamanese languages in the local schools in addition to Hindi and English, teaching the history of the islands in addition to Indian history, employing the Andamanese as teachers, and ensuring ST quotas in employment and education.

Whether we like it or not, primitives – by definition – live in the modern world, subject to relations of unequal power. Whether we like it or not, our perceptions and policies impact upon them, and have already impacted upon them. The urge to insulate them from the world, or to place them under the guardianship of a few wise brown parents who are entirely fallible, is a part of that unequal power, and as much a form of objectification as any colonial art, scholarship or governance. It prevents them from responding to the impact of modernity, and perpetuates the

injustices of their situation. The only effective defense of the primitives we wish to protect lies in giving them the means of understanding *our* understanding of primitiveness, giving them access to *our* means of power.

Posted by [Satadru Sen](#) at [8:32 PM](#)

A Savage Among the Anthropologists



Jarawa dolls sold in Port Blair shops

Last week I participated in a conference that was exhilarating as well as profoundly demoralizing. It was held in Port Blair, the capital of the Andaman and Nicobar Islands. The picturesque former penal colony in the Bay of Bengal is now a terrain contested between the remnants of aboriginal tribes like the Jarawa and the Onge, and a growing population of settlers from the Indian mainland. The point of the gathering was to discuss the future of the aborigines.

I have studied the history of the Andamans for many years, but this was my first conference on the Andamans *in* the Andamans. So there we were for two days, packed into a crowded hall, a motley collection of anthropologists, historians, activists, local politicians, bureaucrats and even a general (the Lieutenant Governor of the islands). There was the kindly, thoughtful, former director of the Anthropological Survey of India, along with a contingent from the current AnSI. There was Charles Darwin's great-great-grandson, albeit in his capacity as an anthropologist convinced that capitalism will soon collapse. There was a retired IAS officer, also a trained anthropologist, with the look and manner of a mad Tantrik. There was an activist who, in the spirit of full disclosure, had written about her excitement when a naked Jarawa man felt her breasts in the jungle (supposedly it's the Jarawa way of confirming that clothed women are in fact female, but it could also be that most men are fourteen-year-old boys at heart), but who wanted to complain about the new Jarawa habit of downloading pornography on their cell phones. There were journalists and television cameras. There were, of course, no Andamanese present at this meeting about their future, except for a Great Andamanese woman who silently served tea to the participants before disappearing. (There was a Nicobarese activist and an anthropologist, but the Nicobarese are not black-skinned and are excused from having to be 'primitive' all the time.)

Such a gathering would have been unthinkable at a conference in America, where the divide between the academic and non-academic worlds is rarely breached in practice, and academic gatherings are staid, polite and ritualistic. But in Port Blair, there were sharp clashes of actual interests and not just veiled egos: the bureaucrats resented the activists, the academic anthropologists resented the government types, the settler-politicians resented the bleeding-heart defenders of aborigines, the general resented the civilians, and nobody liked the historians. People shouted angrily, interrupted speakers in mid-presentation, tried to grab the microphone, burst into tears, refused to leave the podium, inserted themselves into panels

without warning (one panel ended up having eleven presentations), and stormed out. Terrible drivel was punctuated by informative presentations. And although I too stormed out at one point (only to be placated and return like a prima donna), there was something politically alive about the whole thing: a sense of real stakes.

By the end of the conference, intensity had turned into disgust. The absence of the Andamanese from the conference, except to serve tea to middle-class citizens who loved hunter-gatherers but had no intention of doing much hunting or gathering, had become both literal and a metaphor of Indian democracy. In the place of aborigines and their views, was the verbiage of the civilized: administrators of ‘primitive tribes’ who wanted to deflect criticism, settlers who wanted access to the tribal reserve, activists who were thoroughly invested in their self-appointed guardianship of the primitives. The Tantrik administrator-anthropologist declared without embarrassment or irony that Onges and Jarawas should be encouraged by their government-affiliated minders to work for provisions, but only to preserve their self-esteem; they must not be paid monetary wages under any circumstances. Money, like politics, porn and self-representation, would be the apple in paradise.

The administrators and settlers were easy to understand, even when they suggested that aborigines be removed from Great Andaman and concentrated on one small island. The settlers, in particular, were straightforwardly and rationally self-interested, and there was a logic to their argument that the concerns of more than a hundred thousand tax-paying, vote-casting members of the public outweighed those of six hundred aborigines. It was the activists who were the revelation and the source of the disgust, because they did not *appear* to be reactionary. They were, for the most part, English-speaking, college-educated and middle-class, and they included that famous archetype of the Indian leftie: JNU faculty. Yet the prospect of aborigines as fellow-citizens sat poorly with them. They were far more comfortable with the idea of ‘primitive tribes’ as children, whose lives would be simultaneously ‘protected’ and controlled by their enlightened well-wishers.

It was as if the Protectors of Aborigines in nineteenth-century Australia had been reborn as a less exalted horde of Indian journalists, novelists and professors. Or rather, it was as if the debates on race, rights and citizenship that have driven the politics of aboriginality in other democracies – Australia, the United States – since the Second World War had never happened. And indeed, because they had not happened in India, we were left with an activist posture that was inseparable from racist and colonialist imaginations, in which race is biologically inherent, identity is beyond politics, some people are trustees, and others are held in trust. In this perspective, the ‘primitiveness’ and ‘vulnerability’ of some people so defines who they are that if they were no longer primitive and vulnerable, they would no longer be people at all. So they must be ‘protected’ from change at all costs, protected from contact with outsiders, protected from information and pornography, and protected also from adaptation to the modern world of politics, money and rights, because adaptation suggests agency, which children cannot possess. They must be insulated in a bubble of jungle as a middle-class fantasy of pre-capitalist purity and innocence, cocooned in somebody else’s hope that capitalist society would not find them out. And because that hope is known to be false, and the insulated are a sort of living dead, the whole enterprise is shrouded in a vocabulary of imminent extinction and a sentimental, masochistic anguish that allows activists to weep at the podium.

I gave a mildly acidic talk that was greeted with consternation, archly disapproving remarks about ‘provocative’ ideas, and one woman announcing that she disagreed so comprehensively that she didn’t know where to begin objecting. The administrators and settlers were less disapproving, which I found more disturbing. But with progressives like these activists, reactionaries are redundant. Near the end of the conference, the principal organizer of the conference asked me to make some closing remarks that included policy recommendations. I was surprised, but obscure historians rarely get the chance to talk policy before a panel of senior administrators and I was happy to accept the invitation. So I hurriedly wrote a few words and went back to the podium. The audience this time was more openly hostile, and in the middle of my talk a few of them (including the activist who had been groped by the Jarawa) sprang to their feet and began objecting vehemently, having taken issue, no doubt, with my suggestion that the Jarawa be allowed to watch porn. The Lieutenant Governor had to intervene before I could continue. He also remarked that he would have preferred a conference organized ‘along Army lines.’

Small animated huddles developed when it was over. The English and Germans in the audience stood sympathetically over me, expressing their shock at what had happened: they had never seen anything like it. One of the JNU professors overheard them and offered, ‘People were outraged.’ For a moment I thought she meant that people had been outraged by the disruption; then I realized that she meant the disrupters had been justifiably outraged by my remarks. At that moment, I realized how profoundly out of step I was with both the left and the right wings of Indian democracy, and I needed very badly to skip the formal dinner and go drinking with the white folks.

The funny part of the episode is that nothing I said would be controversial in, say, North America or Australia. Here is the text of my recommendations to the Lieutenant Governor.

“Thinking Futures: The PVTGs of the Andaman & Nicobar Islands”

(Conference in Port Blair, December 4-5, 2014)

Policy Recommendations for the Office of the Lieutenant Governor

Satadru Sen

Preface

In the Constituent Assembly of India, Pandit Nehru, Dr. Ambedkar and their colleagues took the remarkable step of establishing suffrage without qualifications in a nation made up largely of illiterate, impoverished peasants and tribals. In doing so, they rejected the common colonial claim that most Indians were ‘not yet fit’ for democracy, and declared

that all human adults are capable of functioning as citizens. They made no exception for hunter-gatherers or nomads. They assumed, liberally and boldly, that all citizens – even the most humble and ‘backward’ – can recognize their political interests, deal with the state on their own behalf, and participate in the functioning of the state. That assumption has not always worked perfectly, but it is nevertheless the ideological and moral basis of the Indian state.

Nehru and Ambedkar also understood that not all sections of society are equally strong, and that the state must assist and defend the weaker sections. But they saw no inconsistency between the protective state and the democratic state of universal adult suffrage. They suggested that the two concepts were mutually dependent: democracy must protect the weak, but the weak must have all the rights of citizenship in order for democracy to exist. This too is a foundation of the Republic of India.

Organized into the categories of "Rights, Representation and Information," "Education" and "Economy," the proposals put forward here are aimed at reconciling the ‘vulnerable’ condition of the Andamanese tribes with their status as Indian citizens, and to ensure that citizenship provides them with the same benefits and protections that other Indians expect for themselves.

RIGHTS, REPRESENTATION AND INFORMATION

Goals: To ensure to tribals their democratic and legal rights, and to provide them with information that would enable them to function as full citizens, while ensuring their dignity and protecting their identities as members of small tribal groups. The objective is neither to segregate the tribes from the mainstream, nor to deny the facts of their disadvantage and suddenly remove all protections. Accordingly, the objective of specific proposals I am making is to facilitate the tribals' interaction with the mainstream on terms over which they – the tribals – have substantial control. Also, it is to revise the legal basis of tribal identity in a way that makes it possible for the tribes to grow and thrive. Most importantly, it is to create an administrative posture that treats the tribals as adults, not children.

Proposals:

1. Exclusive tribal rights to the land of the tribal reserve must be protected.
2. Within the reserve, there should be no special interference by the administration or AAJVS in the day-to-day lives of tribals: no attempts to regulate their moral lives or contacts with outsiders, no externally imposed restrictions on drinking, smoking, watching pornography, and so on.
3. Tribal councils should be formed as soon as possible for the Jarawa and Onge. These councils (drawing upon tribal traditions of self-government whenever these are

available), should be elected by members of the tribe to represent the tribes. These councils should be trained by the administration to gradually take over the management of tribal finances, and to conduct basic intra-tribal governance in a way that is consistent with the Indian Constitution. A similar council should be formed for the Great Andamanese when their population reaches 100, and for the Sentinelese if and when they give up their isolation.

4. The issue of the ATR should be determined by the Jarawa themselves, either through the tribal council or through a referendum. We must not assume that the Jarawa want the road to be closed; nor should we make that determination for them. For all we know, they might want to keep the road open and collect a toll. Giving them the final say over the road would be consistent with the principle of tribal control over the territory of the reserve.

5. A broader legal framework of tribal identity should be created, either nationally or locally. Women who marry non-tribal men should retain their tribal status. Children born of such unions (and all unions, marital or extra-marital) between tribal women and non-tribal men, as well as between tribal men and non-tribal women, should have tribal status, as should the children of those who are of 'mixed' race. There must be no insistence on 'purity.' This would bring administration in the islands in line with aboriginal policy in other democracies, such as Australia, New Zealand, the United States and Canada.

6. The administration should ensure that there is no barrier or discouragement (formal or informal) to marriage between tribals and non-tribals, or between people from different tribal groups.

7. Social workers affiliated with the administration, ANTRI or AAJVS should be trained to provide tribals with information about their legal rights, constitutional rights, and the functioning of the court system. Social workers should also provide tribals with information about basic money-management, banking and access to credit.

8. There should be no restrictions on the employment of tribals outside the reserve, anywhere in the A&N islands. Tribal employees who believe that they are being subjected to exploitative, abusive or illegal working conditions should have a readily accessible forum where they can file a complaint. That forum can be provided by the administration, ANTRI or AAJVS. It should be able to intervene quickly to resolve the situation, and to initiate police action if necessary.

9. A similar forum should be maintained for complaints against abuse by the police.

10. There should be no restrictions on the movement of tribals, within the islands and beyond.

11. The right to vote must be ensured for members of tribal groups. The administration should take steps to provide voting cards, and to educate tribals about voting.

12. The status and rights of Scheduled Tribes should be ensured for the Andamanese tribes, in education, employment and political representation.

EDUCATION

Goals: To create in the islands a cultural and educational climate that is inclusive rather than exclusive, which is attractive and meaningful to tribal children and parents, and in which tribals and non-tribals can all participate and benefit. The objective is to give shape to tribal identities that fit comfortably with Indian society and produce genuine opportunities for economic mobility, and at the same time, to ensure that non-tribal Indians living in the islands are familiar and comfortable with the culture of the tribes.

Proposals:

1. Andamanese languages such as Jarawa and Onge should be taught in the schools of the A&N Islands, in addition to Hindi and English. All children, tribal as well as non-tribal, should learn one tribal language. The administration need not insist that Jarawa children will learn Jarawa, Onge children will learn Onge, and so on. Any child should be free to learn any tribal language that is offered at his or her school. The objective should be to make all children in the islands familiar with a broadly conceived tribal culture, rather than lock them into closed and rigid identities. This will also allow for the protection of tribal languages within the established national policy of the Three Language Formula.

2. Tribals should be employed in the schools as language teachers, on the same salary scale and with the same benefits as other teachers.
3. The history of the islands, with an emphasis on the history of the tribes, should be taught to all children (tribal and non-tribal) in the schools, in addition to the standard curriculum of Indian history.
4. The curriculum of the island schools should be broadly revised in a way that is sensitive to tribal culture, and that makes education directly relevant to the lives of the children. It is not that tribal children should not learn about Helen Keller and the American space program, but that this material should be balanced by topics closer to their home. Teachers should be trained to teach this revised curriculum, and tribals recruited as teachers whenever possible. New textbooks should be created in consultation with ANTRI and made available to the schools. This restructured curriculum should be taught to *all* students, and not just tribal children.
5. In teacher training as well as curricular development, ANTRI should liaise with institutions on the mainland, and initiate exchange programs for visiting instructors and trainees, so that experience and innovations can be shared widely and effectively.

6. There should be no segregation of tribal and non-tribal children in the schools outside the reserve. Tribal children should be able to attend the same schools that non-tribal children attend.

7. School enrollment should be mandatory. A special school should be established within the Jarawa reserve, and administered in close coordination with the Jarawa community. The curriculum should cover what is important to the Jarawa, without ignoring the general curriculum. Here as well as in schools outside the reserve, promising tribal students should be identified early, advised about further educational opportunities, and provided with the guidance of mentors affiliated with ANTRI.

8. Computer literacy for tribal children should be a priority of the schools. Children should be given easy access to computers at the schools, and loans of tablet PCs if that is found practical. The Internet should be easily accessible from the reserve.

ECONOMY

Goals: To equip tribals to engage the market on their own terms as far as possible, to minimize their disadvantages, and to allow them to benefit from their existing and potential resources. Economic policy should begin with an acknowledgment that tribal societies are unlikely to remain unaffected by the wider economy and media. ‘Traditional’ pursuits like hunting and gathering and subsistence fishing may become inadequate and unappealing to tribals themselves; there are signs that this has already

happened to some extent. Economic alternatives should be structured in ways that allow the tribes to maintain control of their resources.

Proposals:

1. Individual tribals who wish to set up business ventures, both within the reserve and outside, should be able to do so, subject to regulations and restrictions drawn up by the tribes themselves.
2. Tribes should be encouraged and assisted in collective initiatives for selling reserve products and services to outsiders, subject to regulations and restrictions drawn up by the tribes themselves. Fish and crabs, which are currently harvested and sold illicitly and cheaply by tribals to non-tribal buyers, should be brought into a legal, regulated system of prices and transactions.
3. Tribes should receive a percentage of the proceeds from the sale of merchandise directly related to tribal culture (such as dolls, masks, performances, etc.).
4. A financial institution should be established for the tribes, to coordinate small savings, the investment of tribal funds and the provision of credit.

Ethnocracy, Israel and India

Following the triumph of the BJP in the last Indian election, it is appropriate to revisit 'Hindu rashtra' in its various manifestations: a trope, a place and a relationship between the nation and the state. This need not mean reopening the familiar trajectory of Indian politics since the 1980s. Such investigations are not exhausted, but they no longer break new ground. It is more rewarding, I think, to look comparatively at the concept of India as 'Hindu rashtra,' and the most productive point of comparison is the 'Jewish state' of Israel. Whereas Israel has featured in recent studies of Pakistani ideology, most notably by Faisal Devji, remarkably little has been essayed in the direction of India: remarkable not only because of the close relations between Israel and India since the 1993 Oslo accord between Israel and the PLO, but also because the two countries reflect forms of majoritarianism that are both different and strikingly similar. In the similarities and differences lie the possibilities of justice, peace and democracy, and the fates of 'minorities': Palestinians in Israel, and Indian Muslims.

That deployment of terminology is not innocent, since 'Palestinian in Israel' and 'Indian Muslim' suggest significantly different modes of minority identity, and different constructions of the democratic community of the state. Moreover, there are major – although not overwhelming – differences between how Israeli and Indian national narratives have dealt with the what might be considered the visibility of information, which is fundamental to the ability of a minority group to exist within the framework of democracy. Nevertheless, if one takes into account the *practices* of inter-community and community-state relations in India and Israel, the presumption of difference, which might be comforting to secular nationalists in India, begins to wear thin. We are forced then to ask how Indian nationhood can 'work' for minorities, and

whether the contradictions between ethnic monopoly and democracy that are inescapable in Israel can be escaped in India.

The Zionist Model

The structure of the Israeli state, Nadim Rouhana has persuasively argued, rests upon three pillars: the democratic nature of the state, its 'Jewish character,' and its obsession with security. The second and third, Rouhana shows, severely complicate the first, making it nearly impossible, for instance, for Israel to create a constitution that might protect the rights of all its citizens. But the notion of a 'Jewish state' is by no means straightforward. It does not mean a binational state, since Palestinians in Israel are not recognized as a national group that has a claim upon the state. It could mean a theocracy; it does not. Zionism was a secular ideology and Israel remains for the most part a secular state, although religious parties have become a major influence upon successive governments. It could mean a Jewish-majority state that is only incidentally predisposed towards Jewish cultural markers like holidays and historical references; it does not. It could mean a state that claims (and is claimed by) all Jews everywhere and gives them an automatic right to citizenship, but that belongs also to its non-Jewish citizens; again, it does not. There exists in Israel a consensus that the state belongs to Jews alone, and that non-Jews cannot have a say in determining its priorities, objectives and 'character' even if they are citizens. Citizenship for Palestinians in Israel is thus limited to very specific forums: they can vote, claim the protection of the courts and even enter the Knesset (parliament), as long as these do not threaten exclusively Jewish ownership and control of the state.

That arrangement, in which one ethnic group has exclusive control over a state in spite of (or rather, because of) the presence of other ethnic groups, is what Oren Yiftachel and As'ad Ghanem called ethnocracy. In their theory of the ethnocratic state, Ghanem and Yiftachel suggested that the concept provides a way around the binary of 'democratic' and 'non-democratic' states, making it possible to account for the Israeli situation, in which a commitment to formal democracy coincides with the determination of a closed ethnic group to

use the state to protect and expand its exclusive claim upon a territory. Successive Israeli governments, they pointed out, have openly pursued policies of 'Judaizing' a land that would otherwise be 'Arab,' using tactics that range from ethnic cleansing, expropriation of land, the renaming of places and the promotion of Jewish settlements to discrimination and segregation in law, education, living space and social services.

The process has not been unilinear. The 1948 war saw the expulsion of the bulk of the native population from eighty percent of Mandatory Palestine, the prevention of their return and the seizure of their lands. Some of that land was settled quickly by the same troops that carried out the ethnic cleansing, the rest came under the control of state and quasi-state agencies, earmarked exclusively for sale to Jews, or turned into state parks or forests. But restrictions on the Palestinians' ability to move about and communicate freely were relaxed when martial law (which applied only to them) was lifted in 1966, and the expropriation of their land (especially in the Galilee, where the concentration of Palestinians was relatively high) slowed appreciably after the Day of the Land protests of 1976. As if to compensate, old Mandate-era laws of repression were retained, land-appropriation and segregated settlement were accelerated in the West Bank and East Jerusalem, and the politics of exclusive ethnic control came to encompass much larger populations of Jews (following the wave of immigration from the former Soviet Union in the 1990s) and Palestinians (in the occupied territories). Without significant checks, the ethnocratic state thus becomes more ethnocratic, compounding the problem of 'what to do' with the excluded population. The identity of the dominant/included ethnicity, meanwhile, becomes progressively intertwined with the state and its structures of discrimination.

When apologists for Israel are confronted with the charge of ethnocracy, or rather, with the charge that ethnocracy is incompatible with democracy, they tend to offer two broad responses. One is a form of denial, in which it is emphasized that Israel is a democracy. Arabs in Israel are, in this narrative, citizens of a democratic state, and that renders moot questions of inequality and discrimination, and of 'belonging' in citizenship. The other, more thoughtful, response is the acknowledgment of an ideological dissonance, the expressed confidence that the difficulty can be managed politically, and often, the implication that such problems exist in many or most multi-ethnic nation-states. The second response can itself be viewed as a deployment of two opposed discourses: one, in which Israel is exceptional but capable of 'managing' that

exceptionality, and another, in which there is no exception: 'the Jews' have a right to control their national destiny in their nation-state just as 'the French' or 'the English' do in theirs, and the problems faced by 'Arabs' or 'Palestinians' in Israel are no more unusual or intractable than those of minorities in France or England.

Since the first response (denial) is transparently unsustainable within the Israeli consensus on what constitutes a 'Jewish state,' let us look more closely at the second. On the face of it, the French, English or German parallels appear to make sense. There are, however, several problems with the analogy. One is that when we talk about ethnic tensions in Western European countries, we are talking primarily about anti-immigrant racism. Without taking anything away from the seriousness of such racism, it might be conceded that it is one thing to bar immigrants from full membership in the nation-state for a limited period of time, and another thing altogether when the indigenous population is treated like immigrants by a regime of immigrants. Even in settler-colonial democracies like the United States and Australia (not to mention South Africa), with their histories of extreme racial violence and dispossession, a legal, political and popular consensus has evolved after the Second World War to include the indigenous population in the community of the state.

The second problem with the 'everybody does it' argument is that it ignores the dramatic, although not complete, shift in the nature of ethnicity in western-European countries since the 1970s. Outside the far right, there is considerable agreement that the children of Indian, Turkish, Algerian and Indonesian immigrants can be regarded as English, German, French or Dutch; even a supra-ethnic category like 'British' is no longer needed to accommodate what, until recently, was simply a 'Paki.' For there to be an equivalent to the Israeli insistence that the state belongs to 'the Jewish people' rather than to its citizens, England would have to belong to the 'Anglo-Saxon people,' and Germany to 'the Aryan people,' which few would find desirable after the Second World War. This is not to say that European race problems have been 'solved,' or to be blind to neo-fascist phenomena like the Le Pen constituency in France and the BNP in the UK, let alone Golden Dawn in Greece, but west of the old Yugoslavia there is now an inclusive discourse of ethnicity that is at least publicly hegemonic, and that has supplanted the 'Gastarbeiter' model, in which foreigners will live and work in a country for generations and remain foreign.

Accompanied, not coincidentally, by the maturing of the EU, that shift informs what might be considered the partial recovery of a pre-Great-War model of the liberal European state, in which ethnicity remained subordinate to citizenship. That subordination was never as ironclad as Hannah Arendt – glossing over the limits imposed on liberalism by the nineteenth-century fetish of whiteness – made it out to be in her study of the roots of totalitarianism. But as the fetish has lost some of its public power, it has become possible to rethink European ethnicities, and in a parallel maneuver, to reaffirm the supremacy of citizenship over ethnicity. In the process, not only has nationhood been anchored firmly in the state and the community of citizens (and not in ethnic groups within the state), it has become impossible to regard the privileging of ethnicity over citizenship as anything other than aberrant, even fascist. Yet in Israel, where the Zionism of the founding generation took its cues from the militant ‘sub-nationalities’ of the era of the Great War and its aftermath, the supremacy of the nation over the state has remained normative, relegating some citizens to a status inferior to that of non-citizens who are nevertheless members of the (Jewish) nation. It has placed the state as an instrument primarily in the hands of the nation, and only secondarily in those of the citizen: an arrangement that is not accepted as democratic in any other part of the modern world, with the partial exception of Pakistan.

The third problem has to do with the idea of ‘managing’ a problem politically. If management means negotiation, then that is indeed a normal part of the politics of a democratic state. If, however, the political participation of the problem community is already limited by their exclusion from key policy-making organs, then management becomes less like negotiation and more like governmentality combined with the use of force and manipulation of information, i.e., violence and propaganda. This coercive-manipulative meaning of ‘management,’ it should be noted, fits both the ‘exceptional’ and ‘unexceptional’ models of the Israeli state, since in the first instance it carries the insistence that Israel has a special license to ‘manage’ that derives from the unique history of the Jewish people, and in the second instance, the presumption that ‘everybody does it.’

Since it can be shown without great difficulty that not everybody 'does it,' it is the discourse of exceptionalism that has generally been more central to the justification of Israeli ethnocracy. In this discourse, the Holocaust is described as being both unprecedented, and a link in a long historical continuum of anti-Semitism. The 'unprecedented' (i.e., unique) dynamic generates the exception, placing the Nazis *and* their Jewish victims beyond the circle of history, its norms and judgments, in a quasi-religious minefield of sacrilege where comparison is blasphemy. The dynamic of a continuum extends the exception into the future, producing the permanent 'existential threat' that justifies Israeli actions autonomously of any rational assessment of political and military realities. It is, however, mainly through comparison – through emphasizing the *ordinariness* of racism and the urge to make ethnic groups disappear, and the interconnectedness of discourses and practices – that we can demystify the Holocaust and its continuing aftermath, returning both Germany and Israel to the history of the modern state, its organization of power and its relationship with ethnicity, in which India, the United States, postwar Europe and the old colonial powers are also located and implicated.

To grasp the impact of ethnocracy on the excluded, it is useful to look at Patrick Wolfe's brilliant work on the nature of settler-colonialism. Beginning in Australia, Wolfe extended the scope of his analysis to South Africa and Israel, comparing the relationships in each place between settlers, natives and the state. In the process, he re-examined the common (and for Zionists, scurrilous) comparisons made by critics of Israel between the Israeli treatment of Palestinians and apartheid in South Africa. The Israeli situation shares with other settler-colonialisms what Wolfe described as the superfluity of the native: the indigenous population has no place in the scheme of things. Wolfe rejected the parallel with apartheid, but for reasons that are quite different from those offered by Zionist apologia. In South Africa, he pointed out, the dominant/settler community preserved a substantial ideological, economic and even geographic space – a need – for the dominated/natives. In Israel and the occupied territories, there is no corresponding need and space for Palestinians, who exist largely to be wished into invisibility or oblivion.

One can find fault with Wolfe's assertion of superfluity. In settler-colonialism, it might be argued, the native retains a vital importance as a racial sign: even when indigenes have mostly been killed off, as in Australia and North America, they continue to function as a boundary of

the settler's own identity, and as a justification of colonization. There can be little doubt that 'the Arab' in Israel and its neighborhood was assigned those roles in a recognizably Orientalist colonial enterprise: not only was Israeli policy informed by a cadre of 'Arab experts' (i.e., white experts on Arabs), the Arab world was and remains the cultural desert in which – and against which – Israel has 'bloomed' as a garden and outpost of European civilization. But the idea of superfluity is very useful in understanding a process of disappearing, in which information and people have both been removed from the domain of public knowledge.

The most striking part of this vanishing is the effective redaction of the history of the 1948 war (Israel's War of Independence, and the Palestinians' *Nakba* or Catastrophe), which saw the Palestinian population subjected to ethnic cleansing, massacre, rape and dispossession. The suppression of that knowledge – and its replacement by a spurious popular history peddled by hack novelists like Leon Uris – is inseparable from the articulated texts of Israeli self-justification, ranging from the Zionist trope of Palestine as 'a land without a people for a people without a land,' to Golda Meir's claim that there is no such thing as a Palestinian (which persists in the Israeli regime's insistence on using the generic term 'Arab' to refer to its Palestinian citizens, and refusal to acknowledge that they are a 'nation,' like the Jews, in a binational society). It is inseparable from conversations in academia and the media in which invisibility itself becomes invisible, such as the liberal and not especially anti-Palestinian Leon Wieseltier telling Edward Said that not only did 'intelligent' Americans know all about the misfortunes of the Palestinians, that knowledge had become clichéd. It is inseparable, finally, from the arbitrary governance, violence and dehumanization with which Palestinians in Israeli-controlled territories have lived since 1948 with or without the knowledge of Americans, and with or without the *consciousness* of Israeli Jews: a reality that can best be understood as Giorgio Agamben's state of exception, in which the objects of state power inhabit a 'camp world' that is normatively excluded from normalcy.

Under those circumstances, minority subjectivity can no longer be reconciled with citizenship. Regarding Palestinian citizens of Israel, Sammy Smootha complacently noted that they were becoming 'Israelized,' i.e., converging with Jewish citizens in their perspectives and priorities. As Rouhana has shown, however, those converges are limited and contextual, lacking any affective identification with the Israeli state. Palestinian citizens of Israel generally see

themselves as Palestinian-in-Israel, not Israeli or even Palestinian-Israeli; the 'Jewishness' of the state has accentuated their Palestinian-ness, limiting their 'Israeliness' to purely instrumental transactions with the state. That failure to identify themselves with the state is, of course, then held against them by Jewish Israelis as evidence of disloyalty and other civic shortcomings, although to expect the excluded group to 'love' and identify themselves with the state is clearly unreasonable. It is not uncommon for Israelis to complain that Palestinian citizens do not serve in the military, and to use that complaint to justify various forms of discrimination, but the Israeli military does not *want* to train, equip and deploy Palestinian soldiers, except those recruited from sub-groups like the Druze and the Bedouin, and that has not saved the Bedouin in the West Bank and even the Negev (inside Israel proper) from being subjected to arbitrary controls on their movement and residence. Under the best of circumstances, ethnocracy compels even 'assimilated' individuals from the 'wrong' ethnicity to remain permanent Gastarbeiters in their own homeland.

Ethnocracy and Right-Wing Thought in India

While the concept of 'Hindu rashtra' has its direct roots in the political ideology of V.D. Savarkar and then the RSS, Hindu majoritarianism, or the idea that a particular 'community' has a special claim on the Indian state and another particular community is the designated outsider, is both older and more complicated than Hindutva. It also predates Tilak and the Congress Extremists of the 1890s, among whom we might locate the beginnings of a modern Indian government. The earlier strands of Hindu nationalism had room for minorities, and specifically for Muslims; they were, as such, alternatives to what became the better-known discourses of Indian nationhood: liberal-secular ideology, the nation-of-communities narrative, Gandhian Ram-rajya, the Two-Nation Theory, and of course Hindutva.

The earliest example of a non-ethnocratic Hindu nationalism can be found in the writings of Bhudeb Mukhopadhyay, who between the 1860s and 1890s produced a substantial body of fiercely polemical essays about a crisis of nationhood and society in colonial India. Bhudeb explicitly identified himself as conservative (*rakshansheel*), but his was a modern conservatism,

informed by Comte, Darwin and Malthus. A well-connected official in the education bureaucracy of Bengal, Bhudeb was clear about his own identity as a Brahmin and his investment in Brahmin privileges and specializations, but he was not the passive recipient of any precolonial understanding of shastra. He sought, rather, to reinterpret shastra for the late nineteenth century as the text of restructured familiarity, racial health and national rejuvenation, compensating for the biological and cultural degeneration that Hindu self-hate and unthinking mimicry of Europe had apparently brought about. His project was more a prescription for change than a plea for continuity, progressive in spite of itself: he showed little interest in the establishment of an independent state, but his vision of a healthy and confident nationhood was implicitly a prefiguring of citizenship.

The nation Bhudeb wanted to 'conserve' was primarily Hindu and only secondarily Indian, although the two categories were also interchangeable. When he wrote about the place of Muslims in this nation and its geography, he proceeded from an assumption of separateness: culturally and socially, Hindus and Muslims were distinct peoples. The distinctness, however, was not formulated either as a clear hierarchy, or as a permanent or even important political reality. Bhudeb had begun his career as a teacher in the madrasas, and emerged with an open respect for the maulavis who also taught at those schools. They had impressed him not only as learned colleagues, but as recognizable members of a shared *Indian* society, whose sensibilities of right and wrong, propriety and impropriety, wisdom and foolishness, were much closer to those of the conservative Hindu than those of the Anglophile Hindus he disdained. He was not untouched by Orientalist histories of Muslim oppression, but he was not locked into them, preferring to seek out areas of convergence between Hindus and Muslims. He acknowledged not only the colonial educational milieu that had drawn pandits and maulavis together, but mutual adjustments of habit brought about by India itself. Deeply immersed in a reconsideration of the Indian family, Bhudeb deployed a familial metaphor: Hindus were the natural children of India, he wrote, but Muslims were her adopted children, and the difference of origin was less important than the kinship and commonalities that history had established.

Thus, unlike his more famous contemporary Bankim, Bhudeb suggested that it was possible to be a conservative Hindu and Indian nationalist without being a Muslim-hater, and to make room for Muslims *as Muslims* within an Indian nation. Some of this outlook found its way into

the thinking of Benoy Kumar Sarkar in the next generation of Indian nationalists of the right. Sarkar was, of course, a very different intellectual from Bhudeb: uninterested in the conservation of the religious community, unafraid of ‘mimicry,’ contemptuous of traditional hierarchies, and directly invested in the independent state. He wrote from the perspective of an anti-communist admirer of authoritarian-militarist regimes in Europe and Japan, disdainful of the apparent spinelessness of the Congress. But he shared Bhudeb’s assumption that Indian nationhood was ‘naturally’ Hindu in its boundaries and content: Hindu identity was the default position from which the self-liberating Indian articulated other, negotiated and experimental, identities and political structures.

In Sarkar’s earliest writings, penned during the Swadeshi agitation of 1905-11, we can find traces of an anti-Muslim animus that was part and parcel of militant nationalism in contemporary Bengal. He gradually left the prejudice behind; by 1922 he was not only defending Aurangzeb as emperor of all Hindustan, but issuing blistering attacks on those (like his friend Lajpat Rai and the historian Vincent Smith) who suggested that Muslims were aliens and oppressors in India. Going further than Bhudeb, Sarkar argued that what was considered ‘Hindu’ culture would have been impossible without Muslim contributions, and that all Indians were Hindu-Muslim hybrids. Between the 1920s and the Second World War, he developed a second polemic: he pragmatically advanced a construction of Indian nationhood as a partnership between Hindus and Muslims, and tried hard to be inclusive in his choice of symbols, icons and even language. When this vision of partnership failed and the country was partitioned, he became less generous towards Muslims, but even then he refused to see the truncated state of India as a country for Hindus.

By the time of Sarkar’s death in 1949, however, his vision was obsolete: those who cared to identify themselves *politically* as Hindu had, by and large, adopted the exclusionist postures of Savarkar and Golwalkar. Even there, it should be noted, there is a gradation: whereas Savarkar was willing, albeit reluctantly, to include within the nation Muslims who Hinduized themselves, Golwalkar’s more straightforward racism closed the door entirely. On the other hand, the secularism of the left had closed the space for political self-identification as Hindu, limiting inclusive nationalism to those who are easily caricatured as ‘pseudo-secular.’ To be very clear about this point: I do not suggest that indifference to Hindu identity, or its treatment as a purely

private matter, or the rejection of the deeply flawed Orientalist historiography of an existential conflict with Muslims – in other words, being ‘pseudo-secular’ – is without value in Indian democracy. A basic problem of the Indian national narrative is that the left and the right have both tended to accept the same history of ‘alien oppression,’ in which content that does not support the narrative of oppression has been systematically buried, and whereas the left has downplayed religious identity and wanted the nation to ‘move on,’ the right has wanted revenge, and revenge is the more compelling political motivator in nationalism. Here, even the tactical adoption of Hinduness as place to begin might provide a better, more pragmatic, position from which to negotiate inclusion – and secularism – in a nation that has already been so infused with Hindu content that de-Hinduization, desirable as it may be, is unlikely to succeed.

The given realities of Indian society show both the presence and absence of ethnocracy: India is not Israel, but it is *like* Israel in some ways, both ideological and practical, and it has become more so as Hindutva has gained legitimacy and electoral ground. The differences are crucial: they explain, for instance, why the current government, since coming to power, has done little that might be construed as extraordinarily ‘communal,’ and has even made occasional gestures of inclusive citizenship. While remaining cognizant of the record of Narendra Modi and the BJP, the rise to national prominence of a politician like Amit Shah, and the recent violence in Baroda, it is reasonable to say that any party that appoints M.J. Akbar as its spokesman (and accepts Syed Akbaruddin as the nation’s spokesman on foreign affairs) is going to be somewhat constrained by those choices. This is not merely the behavior of pragmatic politicians, it reflects the operation of a *structure* of inclusive citizenship that cannot be discarded without precipitating a constitutional crisis that only the most radical Sangh activists would contemplate with equanimity. No part of Indian territory or the state, including the highest ranks of the military, is closed to Muslims, the cultural and academic visibility of Muslims remains fairly high, and just as pertinently, the discourse of Otherness is not racialized like it is in Israel. There is no tendency to *consume* the misery of an ‘inferior species’ as an aesthetic experience, which we saw recently in Israelis who sat on lawn chairs, beer in hand, to watch the bombing of Gaza. That aesthetic consumption of murder is not a peculiarly Israeli phenomenon: it is a performative aspect of whiteness (recall Meursault killing an Arab as a meditative exercise, or the culture-industry beginning with Conrad in Africa) and the other side of a better-known coin, on which Europeans consume their avowedly superior morals and conscience, shedding a tear or two on occasion. Indians are not there yet.

In other ways, however, the gap is small. Hindu emigrants, well-heeled citizens of the United States in particular, have increasingly followed a model of diasporic nationalism and civic action in which they, and not Muslim citizens of India, have the stronger claim upon the Indian state. Meanwhile, in every Indian city, discrimination against Muslims in housing is endemic, discrimination in employment is not far behind, Muslim parents worry that their children will be turned away by private schools, and Muslims are disproportionately the targets of police violence and harassment, which, as in Israel, is coded as 'security.' The last dynamic erodes what would otherwise be a major difference between ethnocratic tendencies in the two countries, which is the Israeli insistence – self-serving and insupportable, but axiomatic to believers – that they have peculiar security concerns because of the Holocaust, pervasive and permanent anti-Semitism in the world, and the hatred of their neighbors. Indians may point occasionally to a Chinese threat or a Pakistani threat, but few would say that the existence of India itself is in jeopardy. If, however, the Indian Muslim population is itself perceived by the majority as a threat to security, then ethnic paranoia is not so much eschewed as shifted inwards, enabling undemocratic responses by the state that are not significantly different from those produced by the fear of external enemies.

Indeed, an element of 'existential fear' is visible in the concerns with racial degeneracy that surfaced in India between the 1880s and 1930s. Driven by their colonized condition, British jeers about 'effeminacy,' endemic malaria, epidemic cholera and plague, high infant mortality, and various nineteenth- and early-twentieth century discourses – Gobineau, Darwin, Galton, Spengler – of a 'healthy' population, Hindus as different as Bhudeb, Harbilas Sarda and G.S. Ghurye worried about being outcompeted by racial Others and inferiors. But it was only later, in the time of Golwalkar's RSS, that this demographic anxiety became focused on Muslims threatening to outbreed Hindus in their own country. In recent times, that 'threat' has merged with the perception of 'Muslim appeasement' (i.e., Nehruvian secularism) and given us not only the rhetoric of *Hum panch, hamare panchis*, but also the absurdity of 'love jihad,' in which the old trope of the sexually predatory Muslim male has been dressed up as a new demographic danger with overtones of terrorism.

There is, in Israel, an almost identical discourse of ‘their boys’ seducing and converting ‘our girls,’ and the consequent threat to the dominant ethnic group’s majority status and control over the state. There are also highly governmentalized disincentives to intermarriage between Jews and others (there is, for instance, no provision for civil marriage in Israel) which, to date, have no Indian counterpart. But as if to compensate for the failure in the bedroom, the Indian state has passed anti-conversion laws that serve no purpose other than to maintain and highlight the majority status of a particular ethnic group, which is not in jeopardy by any reasonable mathematics. Not coincidentally, the Hindu nation and the Jewish nation are both beset by the fear of the treasonous Self – the ‘pseudo-secular’ Hindu, the ‘self-hating’ Jew – that refuses to acknowledge the legitimacy of the existential menace, and of the exceptions that menace allows within the ‘normal’ politics of the democratic state. It is worth noting that both allegations of self-hate were born within older discourses of impotence: the cowardly Jew, the effeminate Hindu. Ethnocracy is highly gendered: a vision of the community closed like a fist as a source and a sign of manhood, in which disloyalty is emasculating.

It need not be surprising that Hindu nationalists in the period before the Nazi ascendancy almost universally admired Jews, seeing them not only as a race that had preserved its identity through great adversities (dispersal, discrimination, persecution, minority status everywhere), but also as people who had embarked upon a bold, if quixotic, national adventure in Palestine. In the 1930s the Nazis replaced the Jews as the objects of admiration: they were, after all, able to demonstrate the actual functioning of an ethnocratic state. That approval has, since then, been redirected back to the Jewish nation: where Indians from Golwalkar to Bal Thackeray (and even Benoy Sarkar, albeit half-ironically) spoke admiringly of the German ‘management’ of the ‘Jewish problem,’ the Hindu right now sees the Israeli treatment of Palestinians as a model for the management of troublesome minorities and neighbors. The rise of the management-school graduate as the icon of middle-class aspiration, overshadowing the engineer (and before that, the lawyer), is an under-explored phenomenon in the history of Indian liberalism, with serious implications for democratic institutions. Government is increasingly regarded as a problem of management, not politics.

There can be no doubt that those who advocate ‘Hindu rashtra’ in India face greater challenges than do advocates of the ‘Jewish state.’ The Jewish state is a done deed, with overwhelming

support from the nation both within and without the state, which functions as a point of coalescence for the nation even beyond its boundaries. Hindu rashtra, on the other hand, is perched on thinner ice, not least because its meanings are still open to debate. If it is interpreted to mean a state that possesses a Hindu majority, that has borrowed most of its symbols from that majority, that engages actively in the Sanskritization of national culture, but that has not formally excluded minorities from fundamental claims and contributions, then a Hindu rashtra already exists. Such a state will be majoritarian, in the sense that it will privilege the majority by default and frequently tolerate the oppression of minorities, but it will leave open the doors of political contestation, and privilege and oppression will fluctuate with the normal process of politics. It can be argued, on the basis of the last election, that there is considerable if not overwhelming support in India for this vision of nationhood, which appears to fit a 'common sense' understanding of democracy in an ideological environment in which liberal principles are not especially influential. If, however, Hindu rashtra is to mean formal, exclusive and permanent control of the state by an organized Hindu nation, then it is still a fantasy, countered not only by the subalternity of much of the electorate, but also, paradoxically, by a powerful ideology of Indianness in which ethnicity (or community, in Indian jargon) is conceived as being either subordinate to citizenship, or coterminous with it, but not superior. Citizenship itself provides a second, and in many cases primary, level of ethnicity. The two understandings of Hindu rashtra should not be understood as being mutually exclusive. It is more accurate to regard them as two Hindu-nationalist poles – one maximally ethnocratic, the other minimally so – between which Indian majoritarianism continuously moves.

Exit Strategies

Majoritarianism, perhaps obviously, is only secondarily a problem of the majority: it affects the minority much more immediately. The irony of the Israeli case is that here, minority-ness and majority-ness have been blurred in more than one way. It came out of the European Jews' consciousness of themselves as a disadvantaged and vulnerable minority, a people without 'a state of their own,' who would be safe only as a majority in exclusive control of its state. Even when they were the majority in their own state, therefore, Zionists continued to function in the mode of a beleaguered minority: this was the natural consequence of a nationhood that was not contained by the state it managed to acquire. Majority-ness in the state did not compensate

adequately for minority-ness in the world, but for that very reason, it became even more important. That, however, is not the only political model that has been available historically to modern minorities, including Jews in Western Europe and America, and Muslims in undivided India. Both groups have, for instance, often perceived themselves as standing partially and contextually outside the larger society, uniquely positioned to serve a moral function as observers, examples, and voices of caution and conscience. This was, of course, not appealing enough to Muslim Leaguers or the Zionists, both of whom opted to become majorities, creating serious problems for minorities that were already there. In India, however, they also added to the problems of a minority *within* the minority, i.e., Muslims left behind.

Unlike ‘world Jewry,’ who could identify with Israel even if they lived in the US or France, Indian Muslims could not identify with Pakistan without severely compromising their position in India: the historical circumstances were such that they had to choose. That element of ‘choice’ provided the majority with a political tool, which is the threat or act of expulsion. In Israel, Palestinians who protest too much are invited or compelled to ‘go there,’ ‘there’ being the West Bank, Gaza, Lebanon, England, or a putative Palestinian state located beyond the Green Line of 1967. It is the reflexive reaction to criticism of the ethnocracy: even the novelist A.B. Yehoshua, who once organized a writers’ union with mixed Jewish and Palestinian membership, resorted to it in a debate with the Palestinian author Anton Shammas, who had written – in Hebrew – about the atrocities of 1948 and criticized the ethnic structure of the Israeli state. Again, we have the bizarre spectacle of immigrant and indigenous ethnic groups switching roles.

In India, the equivalent response is ‘If you don’t like it, go to Pakistan,’ and Indian Muslims are commonly accused of being disloyal, crypto-Pakistani. Even on Kashmir, two distinct lines of thought have developed among critics of the insurgency, who wish to retain the rebel state within India. One insists that Kashmir and Kashmiris are both Indian, and want the latter to accept that identity. The other, increasingly palpable, tells Kashmiris that if they do not see themselves as Indian, they can leave, but without taking Kashmir along, because the land belongs to India. The second, obviously, is a quasi-Israeli outlook on a population whose very existence is seditious. The availability of a ‘solution’ – a second state, in which the minority is the majority – only exacerbates the insecurity for the minority, which can be ‘legitimately’ and ‘reasonably’ deported to this readymade ethnic receptacle.

The second state, in other words, is not unambiguously an exit from the problem of ethnocracy: it is quite compatible with the extension and expansion of ethnocracy. This is precisely why the 'two-state solution' is more palatable to Israelis than the PLO's older objective of a single secular state. Even a notorious dissident like Uri Avnery balks at the idea of a single state, declaring that such a state would not only immediately cease to be 'Jewish,' but soon become 'Arab.' Avnery's position is particularly interesting, since he is not invested in the idea of Israel as a 'binational' state either, in which there is a Jewish nation and a Palestinian one. He has moved from envisioning a Hebrew nation-state (on which world Jewry would have no automatic claim) to advocating an Israeli nationhood that belongs to all its citizens, Jewish and Palestinian, and to no one else. But this inclusive nation-state is contingent on the emergence of a sister-state with a Palestinian majority: which would, in other words, contain most Palestinians. Someday, Avnery dreamed, the two states might form a federation, or even become the nucleus of a pan-Semitic entente. If there is an echo here of Jinnah's dream, it is not a coincidence. In each case, the inclusive, liberal, democratic impulse was curtailed by the desire for membership in the ethnic majority. But even that curtailed vision of inclusion - which the Palestinian Authority, the Palestinians in Israel, Palestinians in the occupied territories, and even Hamas now accept (through the *hudna* mechanism of an extended peace) - is anathema to a majority of Avnery's compatriots, many of whom regard him as a traitor.

The demand for a separate state, where control by a particular ethnic group would be assured and exclusive, is one thing it is voiced by a dominated minority, but it is something else entirely when articulated by the dominant majority. The latter situation, in which the majority acts as if it is an aggrieved minority, is a foreshadowing of fascism. In India, that sense of grievance is fundamental to Hindutva, which, like the major strand of Zionism, has sought to occupy simultaneously the positions of the dominator and the dominated, converting a narrative of past oppression into a permanent state of war, or at least a permanent crisis of 'pride.' But in India, the state continues to function as an obstacle to the institutionalization of such projects, resisting capture by a 'community' or ethnic sub-nationality. That was a basic function of the Nehruvian state, and it is hardly a coincidence that Hindutva has waxed as the regulatory functions of the state have waned and all things Nehruvian have come to be seen as obsolete or ill-considered.

The regulatory state, however, is not just an artifact of the left in India. I return briefly, here, to Benoy Sarkar, and his clashes with Congress-led Indian nationalism in the 1930s and 1940s. Sarkar gleefully dismissed the nationalists' favorite fetishes: Hindu-Muslim unity was not an urgent priority, he argued, and even a unified nation-state was not especially important. What mattered, he declared, were independence and sovereignty, and multiple independent states would ensure freedom and dignity for all Indians as effectively as a single, unified nation-state. He was immediately criticized for this sacrilegious indifference to the reality of Indian nationhood, but Sarkar was attempting something that was both innovative and pedigreed. On the one hand, he was articulating his growing pessimism about whether the political project of 'Hindu-Muslim unity' would succeed in the short term, and setting aside that unity as a prerequisite of independence. Given the stalemate in the relationship between the Congress and the Muslim League by 1937, this was not unreasonable. On the other hand, he was disconnecting nationality and citizenship. While that appears similar to the Zionist maneuver, it is critically different: Sarkar was giving priority to citizenship in the sovereign state. He was suggesting that nationality and ethnic relations could be a private matters that would look after themselves, and it did not matter whether this happened in one state or in several, in India or in Pakistan. It was akin to Jinnah's proposal for Pakistan, but without the insistence on a permanent Muslim majority.

Conclusions

The state alone, obviously, is not enough to protect minorities consistently, nor can it always reassure anxious majorities. It is all too often itself the instrument of oppression. That, however, is precisely why it must belong, at least rhetorically, to all its citizens. Otherwise oppression becomes existential, not episodic, and defeats the possibilities of civic – and civilized – contestation. Citizenship and nationality can legitimately be separated, as they were in the Soviet Union, only when nationality is detached from any particular identification with the state. Constitutionally and polemically, the USSR was not the state of the Russian people, even if Russians were the predominant nationality. A state that openly declares itself to belong to only some of its citizens and their co-ethnics beyond its boundaries, but not to its indigenous population, does not need anybody to delegitimize it; it delegitimizes itself.

But apart from the Kafr Qassem massacre of 1956 and the killing of a dozen-odd protesters in October 2000, the Israeli state has not killed its Palestinian citizens in large numbers. In India, on the other hand, even the occasional pogrom produces a body count reminiscent of the Palestinian predicament in the West Bank and Gaza. The Indian case is a sharp reminder that even formally 'open' and civic nationhood is often conceived with a particular ethnicity at its center, and that in such cases, formal citizenship – while a necessary foundation – is not an adequate guarantee of democracy, in the sense of a demos that is bound together by ties of affect and equal membership as well as the franchise. Several things must happen that are not all ideologically consistent, but that are politically intertwined. Citizenship must remain both independent of ethnicity and function as the sign and source of ethnicity. The national historiography must be continuously revised, but at the same time, the underutilized possibilities *within* the dominant narrative must be identified and deployed strategically. Hindu nationalism is not a monolith; there are ways of being a 'Hindu nationalist' that are quite different from Hindutva, and that do not include the exclusion and victimization of non-Hindus.

Nationalism by its very nature involves a measure of bigotry, but bigotries are not equally virulent. Many, if not most, Indians who find the BJP acceptable may find it appropriate that schoolchildren sing *Bande Mataram* and coconuts be broken at the launching of warships, and see a natural relationship between their Indianness and their sense of themselves as Hindus. They may wish that Prithviraj Chauhan had won the second battle at Tarain, or that Jinnah had died three years sooner. But beyond such fantasies, which are common to every nationalism founded on a narrative of defeat, they are not unrealistic: they do not believe that their local butcher is Mahmud of Ghazni, and they reject the idea that India and 'Indian culture' are exclusively Hindu. Indians who adhere to a purer form of secularism must find ways of talking to that demographic, recognizing that a politically viable secular democracy must use all available resources.

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Posted by [Satadru Sen](#) at [10:01 PM](#) [Links to this post](#)

Ferguson

There was something farcical about the drama that unfolded this month in Ferguson, MO, and that may not have ended yet. Between the initial killing (that of Michael Brown) that triggered the protests against the police, and the most recent death (that of Kajieme Powell, also shot on the sidewalk by the cops), both sides in the confrontation followed recognizable scripts, although neither failed to surprise. The protestors, with their militancy and resilience, were remarkable in the history of relations between police and black Americans since the 1970s. Black men are shot by the police with sickening frequency in this country; it is the norm, not the exception. Sustained protest and media glare are the exceptions. It may be impossible to reach a neat explanation for this turn of events, since none of the factors that can be identified in Greater St. Louis – the history of police violence, the racial divide between a mostly-white police force and a mostly-black community, the economic decrepitude of the inner city, the calamitous ‘life prospects’ of young black men – are unique to this particular place. We could call it a ‘perfect storm’ of variables, or simply random.

But the protests were also quite restrained. It cannot be denied that they went beyond the brainless sloganeering that makes street protest in America almost unbearably embarrassing. (“Hey hey, ho ho, the occupation has got to go!” Hey ho? Are the Seven Dwarves marching again?) But the idiom of respectable protest and its specifically American pedigree were not tossed out in Ferguson, in spite of the presence in the shadows of men with guns and Molotov cocktails. The crowd did not take kindly to attempts by old, Church-based, Civil Rights leaders to take charge of the protests, but Black Panther and Nation of Islam types surfaced more successfully as voices of reason, authority and crowd-control. And quite surprisingly, the

protests did not spread beyond the immediate locality, in spite of the prevalence of similarly provocative circumstances in every large American city. Except in slogans, it fell short of a 'revolution'; it was, rather, a miming of revolution, not least for a television audience.

But it is the reaction of the police that was truly bizarre. Much has been made of the militarized response of the St. Louis County authorities, and justifiably so: mechanized, heavily armed and armored police are a new cancer in American society. That the police now functions in the mode of the SWAT team is not a surprise, of course. The revelation is how this army of warrior-cops, with their us-against-the-animals mentality of occupiers among natives, behaved given the chance to go to war. We saw camouflage uniforms, mine-resistant vehicles and the conspicuous pointing of automatic weapons, but we saw neither shooting nor effective crowd-dispersal. The police, for the most part, just posed with their guns and battle-dress, caught between preening and bewilderment. Again, there was that element of television drama, except that it was unintentional farce, scripted by morons.

Very quickly, therefore, the references in the media (including social media) to 'police brutality' against protestors wore thin. Yes, tear gas was used, and beanie rounds and wooden projectiles were fired. But in the worldwide repertoire of techniques for dealing with angry crowds, this was almost non-violent. No live rounds were fired into the crowd, and not even the truncheon saw much use. This was not the Egyptian counter-revolution, Tiananmen Square, Gaza, Chicago 1968, or an Indian city on a bad day. Here, the theater of militarized policing seemed to paralyze the police themselves, subjecting them to the scorn of the audience. After the first day, when the camera turned out to be hostile to the police, there was no doubt about who was on the defensive. Very quickly, the crowd – black men and women whose everyday relations with the police are marked by fear – lost their fear. They taunted, name-called, video-recorded and laughed, while rifle-pointing policemen (like the now-famous [Officer Go-Fuck-Yourself](#)) found themselves escorted from the scene by supervisors, like chastised schoolboys.

That effective fearlessness was a significant victory not just for the crowd, but for victims of racist policing in general. The limits of that victory are also significant, judging by the murder of

Powell in another part of St. Louis. It is not clear that Powell, muttering incoherently and waving a knife at no one in particular, was a part of the Michael Brown protest, but there can be no doubt that by killing him in that moment and in that extraordinarily cavalier manner, the St. Louis police connected him to Ferguson. They sought to reassert their dominance and the fear on which it rests, but they did it on another stage, away from the carnival of cameras and jeering crowds on Florissant Avenue. On Florissant, the police had already lost. But that loss was contained by the theater of the protest itself, which was too ritualized and isolated to pose a wider threat to the 'establishment.' That may yet change, especially if Michael Brown's killer is not charged with murder, but it seems unlikely.

It is interesting to think about the ordinariness, as well as the peculiarity, of what happened in Ferguson. The history of modern policing is inseparable from the history of race. Robert Peel's innovations in Victorian Britain are entwined with anxieties about the Irish and urban "street Arabs," the antecedents of the Indian police lie in colonial nightmares of Thugs, 'criminal tribes,' terrorists and the native crowd, and big-city police forces in America are rooted in two great race-migrations: the arrival of off-white Europeans in the later 19th century, and blacks moving north after the First World War. But beyond the common dynamic of race-control, there are distinct mythologies of policing: the polite and unarmed English constable, the brutal but servile Indian daroga, the American cop who combines the machismo of the gunslinger with the awesome authority of the state. These distinctions reflect, and to some extent determine, the level of danger the police pose to citizens of democratic states.

The Indian example is the outlier. It is a nakedly unreformed colonial apparatus, loosely bound by law but almost devoid of legitimacy, a delinquency essential for the protection of class privilege but disliked intensely even by the classes it protects. Not surprisingly, its use of lethal force is casual and often indiscriminate, in a way unthinkable in the United States or Britain. The English constable, by contrast, retains a certain appeal not only in his own country, but also among Anglophiles in the two other countries, from readers of Enid Blyton to watchers of Monty Python. He is the displacement of a civilized ideal. That constable, if he ever existed in Britain, did not survive the racial tensions that gave us the Guns of Brixton and another Powell in the 1970s, the riots of the Thatcher era, and the murder of a Brazilian electrician on the London Underground. But as a fantasy, he lives on, not least among Tories who cling to a soothingly

white idea of Englishness. And because fantasies are not powerless, the use of guns and truncheons by the police in Britain falls into a grey area of legitimacy: everybody understands that it happens in places like London and Bradford, but London and Bradford are already a compromised England.

In America, however, violence itself constitutes the legitimacy of police action. The non-violent cop hardly exists in the imaginary of law-enforcement beyond enclaves like Mayberry, which were consigned to pure nostalgia as soon as they were imagined. And even in lily-white Mayberry, the nice policemen came attached to guns. (This was, after all, the geography of Cherokee expulsion.) This means that episodes like Ferguson are particularly vexing: there is a widely shared conviction that the state is normatively an armed presence in civilian life, but simultaneously, the sight of police with rifles (common in India) makes Americans uncomfortable, because rifles blur the distinction between ‘over here’ and ‘over there.’ In a country that worships soldiers, in which all combat veterans are ‘veterans of foreign wars,’ and in which warfare has been charged from the outset with the language of race, the intrusion of the abroad into the home – or rather, the regular presence of the abroad in the home – is intolerable: oppressive, self-alienating, the appearance on the doorstep of one’s own murderous twin and his victims. That, I think, is at least partly why St. Louis County police quickly became paralyzed by their own militarization. The “regular,” non-camouflaged police were less inhibited. They screeched up to the raving black man when they could have kept their distance, drew their guns and yelled when they could have talked instead, and [fired nine times at point-blank range](#) within thirteen seconds of their arrival. This was the state going about its everyday business of authority, and it will continue even when the armored cars have been returned to the Department of Defense. Hey ho.

August 22, 2014

Posted by [Satadru Sen](#) at [4:27 PM](#) [Links to this post](#)

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An Indian Fascism? Doing the Modi Wave

Now that it seems certain that Narendra Modi will be the next prime minister of India, and his opponents are duly horrified, it is worth asking – from inside the circle of opposition – whether the horror is justified. A crude but concise way of doing that is to focus on the trope of fascism that has marked the rhetoric of being ‘against Modi.’ Is the man a fascist? Yes. Is he ‘like Hitler’? Also yes. (I mean, ‘jawohl.’) Does that mean a regime of unprecedented repression and viciousness is imminent? Not necessarily, because it is unlikely that the Indian political system will allow him to *act* as Hitler or even Slobodan Milosevic. But barbarism on a less dramatic scale is another matter, and that is reasonable cause for anxiety on the part of those who worry about things like the rights – not to mention the lives – of minorities and individuals. And, of course, that a Hitler-like person has evidently been elected into the prime minister’s office is reasonable cause for anguish for those who believe that Indian democracy is, on the whole, a good thing.

The f-word should not be used casually in serious commentary; fascism is not a synonym for obnoxious political behavior. But Modi is quite remarkable in that nearly the full range of ‘fascist’ qualities can be applied to him. Aggressive nationalism, lionization of the military, hypermasculine thumping of an allegedly fifty-six inch chest, ethnic enthusiasms, obsession with ‘traitors’ and ‘anti-national elements’ in the population, thirst for historical revenge, mistrust of intellectuals, intolerance of dissent, disdain for rights and constitutional freedoms, corporate intimacies, glorification of the charismatic leader, unification of the leader, the government and the nation: he has it all. Many of those traits are possessed in abundant measure by other Indian politicians – there are no liberals in that bunch – and leaders in other democracies, but very few bring it all together like Modi-bhai.

I say that Modi is like Hitler, and not just a run-of-the-mill fascist, because he is a little mad. What I mean by madness is not racism itself, which is normative in modern society, but its irrepressibility within the person, which is not. In most democracies in this age of instant media, politicians who aim to be statesmen acknowledge a certain code of propriety, if not decency. And Modi, for all his (well-advertised) humble background, is not a naïf: he *knows* that code, and has even tried to follow it, trying to represent himself as simply a better, truer advocate of the Indian ideology of ‘development.’ In that rhetoric, he is a sober advocate of big business and the hard state, and has nothing against Muslims specifically. The problem is that he *cannot* follow the code: his hatred of Muslims bubbles up through the cracks in his skin. It is impossible to listen to him speak of Muslims-in-India without being reminded of “Die Juden sind unser unglück.” When Muslims are murdered and raped by his own political followers, under his watch, he appoints the killers (like Maya Kodnani) to positions of high responsibility and talks publicly about the insignificance of running over puppies. He can put on a Sikh turban on the campaign trail, but not the Muslim skull-cap. And when Muslim migrants from Bangladesh (Muslims, in this rhetoric, must by default be ‘migrants from Bangladesh’ or ‘infiltrators from Pakistan’) are murdered by Bodo militants in Assam, he rants not about the heinousness of shooting toddlers, but about how illegal immigrants must be encouraged to ‘pack their bags.’ There is, here, an undeniable and sociopathic failure of empathy. Not all Bangladeshi migrants are equally illegal, Modi clarifies: Hindus (‘our own people’) must be accommodated, Muslims ejected.

No Republican on the threshold of the American presidency would talk like that about illegal immigrants if, say, border vigilantes in Texas or Arizona gunned down two dozen ‘Mexicans.’ Not only would there be a political price to pay, it would also come across as insane. And indeed, that mad idiom is extraordinary even in Indian politics. Other politicians were quick to express shock and sadness about what happened in Assam. When children are murdered in cold blood, the sane response is to express shock, even if the regret is insincere. Insincerity is the stuff of civilization, after all. When it is eschewed so totally, we have reached a level of savagery in which anything is permissible as long as it is done in the name of the tribe.

This is something new in Indian politics. Mrs. Indira Gandhi, the last Indian politician to stimulate such visceral dislike in a substantial section of the electorate, could be highly cynical in her populism and did not always discriminate between legal, semi-legal and extra-legal force in

her governance, but she was not motivated by a politics of hate. The Emergency impacted Indians across the board, and the mistakes made in Punjab in the 1980s were *mistakes*, i.e., political opportunism (using Bhindranwale against the Akali Dal) and clumsy damage-control (the counterinsurgency operations); they did not flow from any anti-Sikh animus. The nation-state, if not the government, can come back from such mistakes, because the basic relationship between the state and the nation is not disturbed. But when the almost-prime-minister implies that particular ethnic groups are sub-human and expendable, and raises that expendability to the level of national discourse, it may very well be a sign of irreversible damage.

It should be remembered that the Assam killings were not the work of Hindu nationalists. As the BJP's M.J. Akbar defensively noted, attacks on 'Bangladeshi migrants' by northeastern tribal nationalists have a long history. These tribes are typically at the receiving end of the racism of other Indians and the violence of the Army. Moreover, Bodos – who carried out the recent killings – have not got their own state in the Union; they are a minority even in the so-called 'Bodo areas' and loath to accept any further dilution of their ethnic claim to a future state. (I once had a well-known Indian novelist express great sympathy for such defensive xenophobia on the part of the northeastern tribes, but my own liberalism is not so sympathetic.) Their resentment of Muslims is different from that of the Hindu nationalists; it is defined against regional and tribal identities, and not against a broader Indian nation. The Hindu nationalists have essentially sought to co-opt this local resentment of ethnic outsiders, in a strategy pioneered by the Shiv Sena decades ago and extended by the leadership of the Sangh Parivar.

Modi's reaction to Assam is very different from what we might have expected from A.B. Vajpayee or even L.K. Advani. Vajpayee is not a bigot, and Advani is merely a cynical man who knows how to create and exploit political opportunities without being swept up in his own rhetoric. He admitted as much in a conversation with faculty and students at Berkeley at the height of the Ram Janmabhoomi campaign: what is true and what people believe are two different things, he conceded with a smile. Such sophistication is beyond Modi. When he struts about in garish peacock turbans and poses with swords, it is not quite an act; he believes in the fancy dress. A man who can barely contain his virulence will be not transformed by the responsibilities of office into an inclusive and generous leader. Given the chance, he would not only encourage and facilitate the things he now tolerates and refuses to condemn, but follow

through on what one of his aides recently threatened: when Modi is prime minister, his critics will be kicked out of the country. Nothing in his ideological or temperamental make-up would get in the way, and nothing in his political career indicates otherwise.

The question is, would other things get in the way? The most obvious obstacle would, of course, be the reality of coalition politics, which imposes brakes on narrowly partisan initiatives. It is closely related to the fuzzier concept of a 'mandate.' A party that gets about a third of the popular vote, and is imbedded within an alliance that has a bare majority in Parliament, cannot claim to have overwhelming public consent for what it does in government. But those constraints work only if certain other things are given: if there is, across all or most parties, a determination to hold the line on both the letter and the spirit of an ideology, which might be summarized awkwardly as 'the Constitution' or 'the Republic.' That determination can falter in the face of intimidation, indifference or seduction, as it did in Germany in 1933-34. As Peter Gay pointed out long ago, the Weimar Republic was a singularly unloved state: not even those who participated in it, governed it and supported it were especially invested in its principles. Under pressure and internally divided, they shrugged and let it go, not believing they were stepping into an abyss.

In India, where the liberal principles of the Nehruvian state were not deeply rooted in a popular ideology, the defence of the Republic was always reliant on a combination of inertia, commitment and popular participation. The first was the inertia of institutions like the Supreme Court and the Election Commission, which can be expected to function semi-automatically, to preempt or overturn unconstitutionality and illegality in governance. The second was the commitment of a limited elite, which might be loosely described as the urban middle class in its fiefdoms: the press, academia and civil society. The third was the masses, who in their various groupings are better mobilized than ever, vote in record numbers and are unwilling to be disenfranchised. It was the combination of the second and third that saved the Republic in its last major crisis, which was the Emergency of 1975-77.

Now, however, the urban middle class has been neutralized by the allure of the market, to which it is willing to sacrifice vague intangibles like constitutional freedoms, secular principles and, of course, agendas of economic justice. Its practice of democracy defies conventional categories of liberal and reactionary behavior. This is the class that, within the past two years, was in the vanguard of massive demonstrations to create a national ombudsman's office that would restrict abuses of power by the government, took to the streets in unprecedented numbers to protest the government's fecklessness in the face of an apparent culture of sexual violence, and turned out to vote for the AAP. But the 'progressive' crowds that demanded safety for women in public also demanded the death penalty, castration and assorted other medieval punishments for rapists, and had nothing to say about rapes committed by military personnel in Kashmir and the northeast under cover of the Armed Forces Special Powers Act. They had, in other words, no ideological package, in which women's rights go with other considerations of rights, constitutionality and justice. They had only ad hoc 'solutions' to a 'problem' shaped by a frenzy of commercial television. Many of the same people are also enthusiastic about Modi: all too often, the AAP man is the BJP man in a different mood, more concerned with clean government than with the means of cleanness or the implications of order. The Indian middle class' commitment to the Republic is entangled with the deepest roots of its longing for a charismatic leader who will ride in (like Netaji in a submarine, Advani on a Toyota 'chariot,' or Kalki on a white horse) to save the nation, cleaning it up and repositioning it in a world of strategy and competition. (It did not begin with Subhas Bose; the discourse can be traced back to the 1880s.) Even the radical fringe of this class is not blameless. The postmodern disdain for the secular, liberal nation-state has deprived the Republic of a source of legitimation and support that was reasonably organized and influential a generation ago.

While the 'Modi wave' is most visibly an urban middle-class phenomenon, it has seeped into the slums, villages and small towns, where less educated and poorer voters – whose fathers may have rallied around either Jaiprakash Narayan or Indira Gandhi – have been quite willing to respond to the rhetoric of militarism and communal grievance, not least because the UPA government has failed to meet its material expectations. 'Political society' can serve the fascist as usefully as it can serve the dissident, especially when the fascist shares its language. Modi is not the authentic *mahapurush* of middle-class fantasy, after all. He can never be the longed-for geopolitical genius; his knowledge of geography does not extend further than Pakistan and Bangladesh. (Beyond that, there be dragons.) He is an interloper: a man from a semi-lumpen

background who has acquired just enough bourgeois mannerisms to allow the elites to shake his hand, which makes him one of the great success stories of upward mobility in modern India.

The implications of the handshake become clear when we acknowledge that one does not have to be a Hindutwit to find Modi acceptable; his victory is not entirely, or even largely, about chauvinism and bigotry. It is, very obviously, about the extraordinary ineptitude of the last government, the economic downturn, and the weakness of the electoral challenge. But it is also about the lumpenization of the middle-class ethic, which is now marked by an indifference, or rather, a refusal to care about the chauvinism and bigotry of those who promise cleanness and order. It is difficult, in the context of this refusal, to imagine the coalescence of any opposition to the abused power of the state. The Emergency was clearly a crisis of democracy; it disenfranchised people and shut them up. The 'Modi wave,' on the other hand, is crisis of the Republic that is also a triumph of democracy. The people have spoken in record numbers: a 66 percent turnout is magnificent by the standards of elections anywhere in the world. Where, it can easily be asked, is the abuse?

It is, of course, entirely possible that Modi will do nothing that is out of the ordinary. Not only will there be no Nazi-style death camps (such efficiency of organization would be highly un-Indian), there may not even be many pogroms, since naked disorder is bad for business. We may never see a fingerprinting campaign like what the Italian government recently created for Gypsies. But refugee camps for people displaced by riots are also 'states of exception' – constitutional black holes – where extremely unpleasant things happen and nobody on the outside knows or cares, and we can reasonably expect that the new government will operate on the assumption that there is nothing abnormal about the long-term presence of citizens in refugee camps. We can expect related things – which happen already – to quietly acquire the status of what is normal, even legitimate: discrimination against Muslims in housing, employment and policing, for instance. And certainly we can expect the new government to make it very clear whose country it is, and whose it is not.

I want to inject, here, a word about Indian Muslims, who the Hindutva brigade routinely describes not only as a historical enemy, but as a threat to national security in the present. If we hold back from insisting that Muslims are a *part* of the nation that is supposedly insecure, is security not a valid point? There is no doubt that violent groups like the Indian Mujahedeen exist, and that Kashmiri separatism has been both bloody and intransigent. But Kashmiri separatism is a Kashmiri and Indo-Pak issue more than it is a Muslim issue, and 'Hindu nationalism' cannot solve it any more than 'secularism' can. The Indian Mujahedeen is a tiny group with no coherent goals. What can they demand, after all? Not secession; that bird has flown. They can only make feeble, if sometimes deadly, gestures of anger and defiance, reminding other Indians that Muslims exist and cannot be sealed perfectly in camps. Indian Muslims are a widely dispersed community, relatively poor, under-educated, subject to discrimination in every walk of life, thoroughly intimidated by the police, constantly abused in nakedly racist terms (see the readers' comments following any article in any mainstream forum by a Muslim writer critical of the Hindu right) and yet with no actionable political demands. Like black Americans, they have contributed their share of public figures and celebrities, but even these – like M.J. Akbar – have to bend over backwards to demonstrate their loyalty, and end up obscuring the predicament of those who are not protected by celebrity status. The idea that they constitute a threat to national security, or are a 'pampered minority,' is a bad joke.

It is, however, a joke that has led Indian democracy to a 'triumph' from which it cannot escape unscathed. The difference between Narendra Modi's India and Jörg Haider's Austria or Silvio Berlusconi's Italy – distasteful but ordinary right-wing, racist regimes – is that the latter did not seek to normalize a state of war against fifteen percent of the population in their own country. Haider and Berlusconi were undeniably harmful, but they were less destructive. Five or ten years from now, when anti-incumbency sentiment inevitably (one can only hope) leads to another government in Delhi, a hundred and fifty million Indians will be even more alienated than they are now. Thousands more will have been harassed or tortured by the police, or politely informed that their son is not welcome at this kindergarten or that vacant apartment. Everybody will do suryanamaskars and sing Bande Mataram at school, and Kashmiri students will be beaten up for refusing to chant anti-Pakistan slogans on command. Textbooks will hammer home the point that Aurangzeb was the devil, Rama was God and Shivaji a 'freedom fighter,' that ancient Indian doctors knew the cure for cancer, that real Indian women prefer death to 'dishonor,' and that 'we' are the most tolerant of all people. And those tolerant Indians who supposedly own the nation, and want a clean government and a belligerently proud state, will

find that it is their books that have been reduced to rubbish, their arts that have been impoverished and vandalized, and their voices that have been muted. They will find that the concept of legal governance has itself been damaged, that gay Hindus are just as ‘illegal’ as gay or Bengali-speaking Muslims (the BJP supports Article 377), and that their own children have been left more vulnerable to police torturers and mobs of men with kerosene cans.

May 13, 2014

Update

Maine maana ki kuchh nahin Ghalib

Mufthaat aye to bhura kya hai?

It is not every day that one wakes up to election results like what we saw today. A ‘lost’ election is always depressing, but this is almost exhilarating; not since 1977 has there been a result this spectacular, in India at any rate. After the September 11 attacks, Damien Hirst got into some trouble for remarking that the sheer spectacle of the disaster was a kind of art. I find myself having a similar response to this massacre. It is also the excitement of standing at the edge of the chasm. (Admittedly, such excitement is a luxury of the safe.)

Modi now undeniably has a mandate. That in itself is not especially disturbing, since it is unlikely that most voters want him to get to work killing Muslims. The work they want him to do can be described in very general, bland terms like ‘development,’ ‘growth’ and ‘governance.’ And frankly, after the indecisiveness and paralysis of the last government, a capable administration

not beholden to parochial interests of caste and region is not altogether a bad thing. There is a legitimate place in Indian democracy for a 'conservative' party if the element of communal chauvinism is dispensed with or kept to a minimum. One may disagree with particular economic or foreign policies, or with a particular legislative agenda, but there is something to be said for a democratically elected government that possesses the will to enact policies and agendas, as long as the electoral system remains intact. A wrong course can be corrected in the next election. Sometimes that is the only way to re-examine policies that have become institutions.

But the problem is that some wrong courses cannot be corrected before it is too late, i.e., before the mechanisms of correction have themselves been damaged. There are also less specific, but no less important, areas of damage: culture, for instance. If the new government manages to keep Ayodhya off the agenda, it will be a miracle. In Benaras, the BJP made a clumsy attempt to get Bismillah Khan's family to endorse Narendra Modi. Such outreach to Muslims may not be entirely cynical, but the artistry and cultural eclecticism that Bismillah Khan represented is precisely what will now be moved to the margins of Indianness. The 'secular' argument against anti-Muslim bigotry in India rests only partially on liberal ideology. It rests also on recognizing and respecting the fact that what we call a Hindu, and what we call an Indian Muslim (or a Pakistani or Bangladeshi, for that matter), is a cultural mongrel peculiar to the region, and that we are whole only as mongrels. Shortly before his death, Eric Hobsbawm ruminated on the suddenness with which Jews emerged on the European 'cultural scene' in the nineteenth century after centuries of isolation, and the energy and volume of their participation in the making of modern European identities. Indian Muslims have never been isolated; they have been prominent participants in the making of Hindustan for a thousand years. Like European Jews, they have been disproportionate contributors: there is nothing in India – music, architecture, food, dress, language, cinema – to which this 'minority' has not made a major contribution. (What would remain of a Bengali-Hindu wedding if the Turkish-Muslim elements were all taken out? Guests would mutiny.) The attempt to articulate India in 'predominantly Hindu' terms, to steal a phrase from the Western media, will produce a nation that is moth-eaten, sterile, delusional and monstrous.

When I say delusional, I refer specifically to Modi supporters like Lata Mangeshkar and Asha Bhosle, who forgot their debt to the Muslim colleagues who wrote their songs and sang with

them. And when I say monstrous, I have in mind not only the impact on musicians, weavers and brick-layers of a nationalism that considers them a problem to be solved, but also the Hindu who delivers the blow in a warm glow of self-love, whose self-love is wrapped up in hate, and who hopes that tearing the fabric of a thousand years of history will leave him and his country magically whole. I want to borrow a few brutally edited sentences from Günter Grass:

An entire gullible nation believed faithfully in Santa Claus. But Santa Claus was really the Gasman. In faith I believe it smelled of walnuts and almonds.

He's coming! He's coming! And who came? The Christ Child, the Savior? Or was it the heavenly Gasman with the gas meter under his arm, ticking away? And he said: I am the Savior of this world, without me you can't cook. And he was open to reason, he offered special rates, turned on the freshly polished gas cocks and let the Holy Spirit pour forth, so that the dove could be cooked. And so they believed in the only true and saving Gas Company, which many believed would bring them the Christmas they expected, but only for those whom the store of walnuts and almonds was insufficient survived the holidays – though all had believed there was plenty for everyone.

But once belief in Santa Claus turned out to be faith in the Gasman, they tried love, abandoning the order of things in Corinthians: I love you they said, oh, I love you. Do you love yourself too? Do you love me, tell me, do you really love me? I love myself too.

But after faith in the Gasman was proclaimed the state religion, after faith and pre-anticipated love, there remained only the third white elephant from the Epistle to the Corinthians: hope. And while they hoped they still had walnuts and almonds to nibble on, they hoped that it would soon end, so they could start anew or continue. And still didn't know what it was that would end. Just hoped that it would soon end, end tomorrow, but, they hoped, not

today; for what would they do, how begin anew, if it ended so suddenly? And when the end came, they quickly turned it to a hopeful beginning; for in our country an end is always a beginning and there is always hope in any end, even the most definitive of ends.

May 16, 2014

Posted by [Satadru Sen](#) at 11:08 PM

Beyond a Windmill

Former Australian PM Bob Hawke recently told Ashley Mallett about an exchange he had in 1970 with Don Bradman. Bradman was then a senior cricket administrator, and, of course, the uncrowned king of Australia. Hawke, in contrast, was a labor union leader, quite far from the Prime Minister's office. He was then trying to persuade the Australian cricket establishment to stop playing against South Africa. When Bradman greeted Hawke with the familiar shibboleth that sport should not be sullied with politics, Hawke retorted that it was the apartheid regime that had done the sully by blocking non-white players from representing their country. Bradman, apparently, was both startled and persuaded by the argument: the forthcoming South African tour of Australia cancelled, and replaced by a Rest of the World team that included individual South African players. The result was a magnificent series, with legendary performances by an aging Garry Sobers and a young Dennis Lillee. The result was also a two-decade period when South Africa became a sort of twilight zone of cricket: missing, but present at the other end of a wormhole of race, money and gambled careers.

Hawke may have overstated his own role, and that of Australia, in the boycott of apartheid South Africa. The Basil D'Oliveira crisis (in which South Africa refused to accept the presence of the colored, South-Africa born, D'Oliveira in the England team) had already moved England closer to a boycott. The non-white Test-playing countries – India, Pakistan and the West Indies – had of course not played against South Africa at all: their boycott was existential as well as ideological, and it is telling that we don't use the term 'boycott' until England, Australia and New Zealand came on board.

Within Australia, anti-apartheid sentiment was not unknown in 1970. The country was, after all, a part of the global half-revolution of 1968, with its student radicalism and protests against the Vietnam War, in which Australian troops fought. All that informed the agenda and methods of the South Africa campaign. Nevertheless, there was something heroic, almost quixotic about Bob Hawke's stance. Bradman's surprised innocence was by far the more typical response, and not just in Australia. In England, the D'Oliveira affair had generated more irritation than real outrage: it was as if D'Oliveira had ruined a perfectly good thing, otherwise known as the apolitical purity of sport and the solidarity of the white Commonwealth. We tend to forget that organized sport in modern societies is nearly always a reactionary edifice, aligned with the interests and identities of those who take privilege for granted and associate the presumption of authority with banalities like purity and innocence. Administered from closed circles of feudal, Tory and then corporate power, cricket is more reactionary than almost any other spectator sport. Bradman was hardly a bad guy: he remains, in many ways, one of the most sympathetic greats of the modern game. It had simply not occurred to him to push the comfortable envelope of whiteness, until Hawke pushed it for him.

It is in that light that we might see the years of the South African boycott. It was one of the most extraordinary, and successful, instances of political boycott in recent times, laying the groundwork for the divestment campaign of the 1980s and substituting for the diplomatic isolation that Western governments refused to deploy. It was extraordinary because it was always the agenda of a minority: the English, Australian and New Zealand cricket establishments, including the cricketers, never really believed in it. They went along with it because of a peculiar convergence of pressures, some emerging in their own radicalized backyards, and some coming from outside. Those external pressures – the opinions and

attitudes of a non-white world of cricket – were vital, and they were not fully acknowledged in their own time. Had the Anglo-Australian establishment not acknowledged a South African problem when it did, the fiction that world cricket could be represented by an imperial council made up of pink dinosaurs, even in 1970, would have cracked like an egg. As it happened, it did crack, albeit gradually. Since the 1990s, and especially since Jagmohan Dalmiya's abrasive tenure at the head of international cricket (and a host of related issues, including match-fixing, ball-tampering, chucking, umpiring and on-field behavior), there has been much grumbling in England and Australia about the rise of the 'Asian bloc,' with its apparently genetic tendencies towards corruption, touchiness, money and disregard for tradition. But arguably that rise began earlier, over South Africa.

It is still useful to ask about the 'nature' of pro-boycott sentiment in the non-white Test-playing countries. That there was nothing uniform, predictable or reliable about this sentiment becomes evident as soon as we look at India and the West Indies. It would be going too far to say that South Africa was immediately relevant to most Indian cricketers, fans and administrators: many, I think, would have shrugged and accepted 'normal' sporting relations, and gone to see Barry Richards, Mike Proctor and the Pollock brothers play against Pataudi, Prasanna and Gavaskar. The position taken by the Indian board reflected the apartheid regime's own misgivings about playing against non-whites, and the heroic, quixotic foreign policy initiated by Nehru, in which anti-colonialism, non-alignment and boycotting South Africa found a new but surprisingly natural mutual compatibility. It was, in other words, a top-down, state-guided idealism. Foreign policy tends to float slightly above public opinion in most large countries, and India was no exception. But in India, cricket was a largely middle-class affair, and that middle class was genuinely – if casually – hostile to racism of the sort represented by the South African regime. That hostility, moreover, was integrated with the politics of the organized Left, and its imprint on policy: it is difficult to imagine South Africa being allowed to play in Calcutta in the years of '*Amar nam, tomar nam, Vietnam*' ('My name, your name, Vietnam') demonstrations.

In the West Indies, the politics of the boycott had deeper soil. Through a combination of writing, activism and play in the 1950s and '60s – the overlapping phenomena of C.L.R. James and Learie Constantine, Griffith and Hall, Frank Worrell and Garry Sobers – racial self-assertion and dignity in cricket had become the basis not only of a politics of justice, but of a sport-based

nationhood found nowhere else in the world. Yet the West Indies, along with England, Australia and Sri Lanka, provided apartheid South Africa with a steady dribble of 'rebel' cricketers in the years of the boycott. These included not just those on the margins of the big time, like Sylvester Clarke and Collis King, but those who were sought out by the South Africans precisely because they were stars: Colin Croft, Alvin Kallicharran. In South Africa, they faced predictable racism, tried to come to terms with the dubious privilege of being classified as 'honorary whites,' and accepted the unreliable affection of white crowds that appreciated this remarkable complicity of pariahs. One of the ironies of the South Africa boycott is that the same white nation that contemptuously refused to share a field with Basil D'Oliveira suddenly became eager to play against Lawrence Rowe, and would have given anything to have Viv Richards.

There is, in this reverse supply of black bodies from the New World to Africa, one of the barely acknowledged tragedies of modern sport. Even after Packer and World Series Cricket, the rewards – counted in the tens of thousands of dollars in the 1980s – were modest in comparison with what professional cricketers stand to earn today. The contracted periods were limited not only by the shelf-life of athletic ability, but also by the endgame of apartheid and the politics of world cricket. It was never enough to compensate for the destroyed careers and reputations. None of this concerned South African plotter-poachers like Ali Bacher, or players like Proctor, whose lives were not adversely affected by their innocent games. They remained respectable even after the end of apartheid, shielded by the aura of sport itself.

For Caribbean players, however, South African cricket was like a dangerous drug that left a trail of moral ambiguity and real damage. It is, after all, difficult to blame professional athletes in an economic backwater for responding to the cash available in South Africa. This is especially true of those on the margins of the phenomenally strong West Indies squad of the 1980s: they had not benefited from Kerry Packer's circus, and their reward for not joining the circus had been snatched away by their own cricket board when the Packer players returned to the West Indies fold. They cannot be easily compared with English and Australian players who joined 'rebel tours' or signed up to play domestic cricket in South Africa; their earnings in their own country were precarious, and the enticement of financial security more compelling. And unlike the middle-class milieu of the Indian game, Caribbean cricket included the poor, who had skills to sell and mouths to feed. Not going to South Africa came with the danger of sliding into squalor.

Ironically, going to South Africa and then being ostracized for having gone often had the same effect. Caribbean cricket, C.L.R. James pointed out many years ago, is played within a powerful class-based code of propriety. Breaking the boycott was highly improper, and the repercussions are unsurprising.

In the 1970s and 1980s, cricket was not yet played in a weirdly skewed universe in which a Third World country was also the goldmine and power-center of the sport. It was an embattled imperial order, and the poorer, relatively vulnerable, black scabs paid the price: white players who went to South Africa were, by and large, rehabilitated far more easily into the cricket establishments of their homelands, and faced little in the way of earnest opprobrium. Graham Gooch, Mike Gatting and the inappropriately-named Geoff Boycott were imbedded within populations that generally saw the boycott of South Africa as a trivial bit of political correctness: an artificial agenda promoted by uppity natives who do not understand the innocence of sport, especially cricket, with its mythology of village greens, spotless whites and permanent hegemony. Unlike the West Indians, they were fundamentally innocent.

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God and Country

British Prime Minister David Cameron recently raised a few eyebrows by declaring that Britain is a Christian country. Cameron and his allies in the Church then explained, somewhat defiantly, that Christianity had supplied the core of Britain's culture and history, and that to ignore the contribution was untruthful. This need not be especially controversial. Cameron is a Tory, after all, and the enshrinement of the Church of England within the official structure of the British state is not new. Still, Cameron's remark and the reaction that has followed are worth unpacking, for what they suggest about secularism in democracy. For while Cameron may simply have repeated an old bit of dogma, he also highlighted the instability of the opposition between 'secular' and 'religious' nationhoods, and the place-specific nature of the instability.

Is Britain a Christian country? It is less 'Christian' today than it was ten, fifty or a hundred years ago: a much smaller percentage of the population identifies itself as Christian. In 2001, seventy-two percent of Britons identified themselves as Christian, whereas in 2011, the percentage figure was fifty-nine. By 2030, Christians will be a minority in what a Church of England official emphasized was 'their own land.' There are too many people around with names like Hasan and Patel, and obviously Cameron was dog-whistling to a beleaguered Little England of people with names like Smith, Jones and Morrissey. As a political tactic, it has its immediate roots in the rhetoric of the National Front and BNP (not to mention Margaret Thatcher): this is *our own land*, not *theirs/yours*. The sharp reaction is a commendable, if unsurprising, refusal by liberal nationalists to accept such naked racism. But it is also a sign of a problem *within* supposedly unproblematic white Britain: if Albion is a Christian country, then it has shrunk by as many as four million souls in the first decade of the twenty-first century.

While naked and clothed racists usually spotlight post-1965 immigration from Asia and Africa, implying that it threatens Anglo-Christian culture, there are other reasons for the apparent dwindling of the flock. The Roman Catholic Bishops' Conference for England and Wales noted recently that the nature of British Christianity and Christians has changed. In the past, the bishops pointed out, Christianity was both a 'culture' and a 'religion.' People who never went to church and gave no thought to the Gospel nevertheless claimed to be Christian. Christian identity was for them a loosely worn cultural cloak, made up of a family name and shared experiences: chapel attendance at school, nuns with canes, Sundays off, Christmas trees, knowing the words to a hymn or two, and having no particular objection to God saving the

Queen. This is not necessarily what the Church of England means by Christian culture and history, but it is nevertheless a real cultural fabric, interwoven with Britishness. This fabric has become less meaningful in Britain: Christian identity is now asserted only by the true believers, i.e., the church-going Evangelical set.

Under the circumstances, the Christian element in Britishness recedes even if immigration by Muslims, Hindus and Rastafarians is discounted. Like much in 'British culture,' British Christianity has become American: a matter of personal faith (albeit with public claims), rather than a diffuse form of ethnicity, which is how religious identity functions elsewhere in the modern world. In India, for instance, 'being Hindu' does not require any particular *belief*, let alone a specific notion of heresy, and 'being Muslim' is entirely compatible with being agnostic. Nehru and Jinnah are the best examples among public figures, but the formulation is ubiquitous. The fact that Khushwant Singh wore a turban all his life never led anybody to doubt his fondness for whisky, but it did identify him as a Sikh. My being Hindu has almost nothing to do with the specifics of my views on God: it derives, rather, from the fact that I am familiar and comfortable with a 'culture' that includes language, stories, holidays and food. Its boundaries are neither precise nor fuzzy: they are functional, or adequate to the needs of dealing with other Indians of various religious affiliations. Not so with Americans, who tend to insist that since I assert a specific religious identity, I must have specific religious beliefs. (The major exceptions are Reform Jews, whose understanding of the connection between ethnicity and religion can be very South Asian.)

On the face of it, the Indian 'system' may seem to better fit anti-fundamentalist understandings of diversity and tolerance. That appearance can hardly be straightforward, since Indian voters are currently in the process of electing a distinctly intolerant man and his political cohort to form the next government. These are men and women who claim to represent the 'Hindu majority,' dismiss anti-Muslim pogroms with the metaphor of running over puppies (which is expected to evoke not horror or remorse, but nonchalance), and strategize openly about forcing Muslims out of 'Hindu neighborhoods.' A portion of this constituency is perhaps made up of Hindus of 'faith.' But a great many others are Hindus in the same way that I am Hindu: they belong to the cultural, rather than doctrinal, circle of religious identity. They are uninterested in my relationships with God, women or Scottish distillers, although connections with Muslims or

Pakistanis are another matter. It could be argued that the Indian dynamic is in some ways the opposite of what has happened in Britain: a largely secular culture of Hinduness has expanded, become more stable in its content and its utility, and consolidated its claim upon national identity. 'Believing' Hindus – or fundamentalists – have become, if anything, even less relevant to questions of who-is-Hindu than when Bhudeb Mukhopadhyay (a believer and a conservative) and V.D. Savarkar (agnostic) downplayed belief in religious identity.

I am suggesting, here, that writers like Pankaj Mishra, who have pointed to the Semiticization of Hinduism since the nineteenth century – i.e., its transformation into a single, compact faith – and connected that streamlining to the rise of parties like the BJP, have got it slightly wrong. It is not that there was no streamlining of dogma. But that dogma is not especially relevant to the body politic. What matters more is the consolidation of *cultures* identified as Hindu, Muslim and Sikh, which can lend themselves as easily to the Congress or the CPI(M) as to the BJP or the Akali Dal. They are, in that sense, simultaneously secular and threats to secularism.

We thus have, on the one hand, an Anglo-American crisis of the secular state, in which the assertion of religious nationhood comes from an increasingly narrow community of believers and their allies among the racists and the cynical. On the other hand, we have a model of majoritarianism in India, Bangladesh and Sri Lanka (Pakistan's problems now fall in a different category), in which the comfortable fusion of culture, religious identity and nationhood threatens to eradicate marginal locations and identities wherever these might be found. The former is a whine (by the religiously identified) against history; the latter an expression of affinity with history, in which the alignment of culture, religion and nation-state constitutes a climax.

Is one worse than the other? Clearly, declarations of 'Christian Britain' and 'Hindu India' both raise the question of whether a nation can have an identity that is autonomous of the population. If nearly half the British population is not Christian, and Britain is nevertheless a 'Christian country,' it puts Britain in the position of a Balkan state like Kosovo, if not 'Greater Israel.' There must then be, openly or tacitly, a hierarchy of citizenships. Similarly, the

Hindutwa vision of India leaves no doubt about the provisional status of non-Hindu citizens. But the Indian predicament is arguably more violent and oppressive than the British, because although India is officially secular and Britain is not, the Christians of 'Christian Britain' must negotiate politically with the heathens. In India, where there is no contradiction between being secular and being Hindu, the negotiation with Muslims is over, although negotiation within 'Hindu society' continues, and constitutes a part of the substance of Indian politics. (Which is one reason why India may not be declared *Hindu rashtra* anytime soon.) As late as the 1930s, Indian politics had a discourse of 'Hindu-Muslim unity,' which implied a political relationship between two substantial, if not numerically equal, entities. That discourse has been replaced entirely by the discourse of 'communal harmony,' which is essentially a rhetoric of law and order. The potential for fascism is accordingly greater.

All the same, I prefer the expansiveness of religious identity in South Asia. Religion is too rich to leave to the peddlers of dogma, and I generally find religious people to be less inclined than atheists to shallow cleverness. When I was fifteen, my mathematics teacher and high school tennis coach was a tough, slightly tragic Irishman named Dr. Waldron. He caught me reading James Joyce one day, which gave us a bond of sorts. I would ride in his car on the way to tennis practice. He didn't care much that I had no talent for either tennis or math, and taught me a few things about Parnell and Irish-republican politics, and the right way to pronounce Sinn Féin. Dr. Waldron, I discovered, was a lapsed Jesuit. Having previously gone to a school where the Jesuit headmaster was impossibly remote, I seized the opportunity to interrogate one up close, curious not only about what was involved in being one, but what might be involved in leaving a very serious club. (Leaving serious clubs was relevant to an emigrant.) The ex-Jesuit did not, of course, go into the details of a crisis of faith with a teenager, suggesting only that a conflict had arisen between beliefs and allegiances. Pleased to have found a fellow-rebel, I blurted out that I was an atheist. Dr. Waldron was amused and less affirming than I had expected. "Ah, my atheist," he chuckled affectionately, and changed the subject. God and church remained frustratingly unexamined, but I had a glimpse of the possibility that doubt can be nested within religion, even belief.

My teenage atheism has left a residue of tension. To put it bluntly, I recoil from displays of religiosity that are both personal and public: yarmulkes, puja tilaks, beards. (Sikh turbans are

exempted.) But the secularism of the modern Indian, which I find I have retained, also makes publicly displayed religiosity *legitimate*. Besides, everyday life in New York City is based on accepting people you find annoying. The French insistence that public space be swept clean of religion strikes me as, well, fascist, not to mention discriminatory, because such a decisive separation of culture and religion is inevitably more hostile to some religions than to others. My ambivalence also has to do with how much – and what – information is conveyed by religious signs. Not all signs are as empty as a patka. Some are, or appear to be, texts of intolerance. A Hindu with a tilak on his forehead is possibly a Hindutwit who donates to the VHP and sees me as ‘pseudo-secular’ (which is the Hindu equivalent of a ‘self-hating Jew’). Skullcaps and beards suggest other politics of intolerance. Between the bushy-faced Pakistani cricketers of Inzamam’s generation and the clean-shaven ones of Imran Khan’s, I know which I might have a drink with. (Does Imran still drink? Not in public, I imagine.) But these texts are also easy to misread. The bearded batsman might be Hashim Amla: not exactly a fire-breathing fanatic. The guys with kippah might be Naturei Karta. And I do know Hindus who might enter a temple and leave with a tilak, but who are also totally opposed to the politics of Hindu domination.

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Gandhi and the Holocaust

(Making Sense of a Bit of Nonsense)

In 1906, the British authorities in South Africa embarked upon the suppression of the so-called Zulu Rebellion. The name given to the conflict by the colonial regime may conjure up images of savages swarming around the circled wagons of civilization. The reality of the counterinsurgency was much shabbier: modern military units pursued, shot and flogged scattered and practically unarmed Africans who posed no credible threat to an empire at the height of its power, and

whose major offense was their objection to a new tax calculated to force them into Natal's labor market. Several thousand Zulus were killed; hardly any whites died. (It was, in that sense, the sort of war that Americans came to see as a reasonable expectation after Operation Desert Storm.)

It's well known that M.K. Gandhi participated in the 1906 affair. The Zulu Rebellion was the second of Gandhi's South African wars. He reactivated the medical unit he had created during the Boer War six years previously, recruiting South Africa's Indian community to fight for the empire that had done so much for them. Gandhi, in fact, tried to persuade the government to give Indians a wider role in smashing the Zulu Rebellion, but the white regime saw this as both unnecessary and undesirable, and Gandhi and his men had to be content with ambulance work. Gandhi's objective may very well have been to promote the rights of Indians in South Africa, not only by making a display of their loyalty to the Empire, but also by bringing them into the field of colonial war, i.e., the political circle of the laager, where citizenship and arms-bearing were joined at the hip. But as Erik Erikson observed many years ago, there was more to it than expediency and ideology. Gandhi's relationship with the Empire and its administrators had the quality of the rebellion of a son: he tended to swerve violently between fierce opposition and an almost groveling loyalty, rejecting the 'father' in the first mode, and desperately seeking his approval in the second.

That swerving habit gave Gandhi's responses to violence one of its most basic qualities, which is inconsistency. Having signed up for the anti-Zulu 'war,' Gandhi quickly discovered that it was not a war at all, but a series of manhunts (as he later described it). He and his men spent much of their time taking care of badly injured Africans that white doctors and nurses were reluctant to treat. Out of this experience came the outraged, almost abusive prose of *Hind Swaraj*, Gandhi's best-known piece of polemic, in which he laid out his case against violence and Western civilization. But five years later, he was back in uniform, so to speak, recruiting Indian soldiers to fight for Britain in the First World War.

Even *Hind Swaraj* is not the inflexible polemic it is sometimes assumed to be. Gandhi makes it clear, for instance, that the appropriate moral response to violent injustice depends on a variety of factors, including the identity of the adversary, the balance of physical capabilities, and the circumstances of the provocation. (There must, Gandhi wrote in his analogy of the armed burglar, be one response for your father, and another for a stranger.) But at other points in the same tract, and certainly in other tracts, he appears to insist that the tactics and premises of satyagraha are independent of context. There were thus two levels of inconsistency, or, seen another way, flexibility: one within the ideology, another without. Raghavan Iyer called this the maintenance of a distinction between ‘ahimsa as policy’ and ‘ahimsa as creed.’ Thus, even the very late ‘inconsistencies’ in Gandhi’s career – his apparent acceptance of ‘any means necessary’ in the Quit India uprising of 1942-43, or his endorsement of military force in national defense in 1947 – need not be seen as lapses or *surprising* acts of desperation. Satyagraha made allowances for desperation.

It is in the context of this flexibility, then, that we might look at Gandhi’s most notorious application, or misapplication, of the concept of satyagraha: the Holocaust. When the Nazi persecution of the European Jews began, Gandhi began to receive requests for his reaction, or even a prescription. The queries sometimes came from old Jewish friends and collaborators; there had been many in Gandhi’s South African years. Sometimes they came, in rhetorical form, from gleeful adversaries who believed that Gandhi had finally met his ideological match in Hitler. And sometimes they came from people like George Orwell, who found Gandhi’s moral certainties oppressive but nevertheless *wanted* him to have an answer. Gandhi disappointed them all, taking a remarkably hardline stance: yes, the German-Jewish predicament was horrendous, but those targeted by the Nazis must nevertheless offer satyagraha. In a line that has become justifiably infamous, he suggested that the Jews should hurl themselves from cliffs rather than ‘submit’ to their tormentors. The suggestion need not be taken literally, but the meaning is unmistakable: Gandhi was saying that non-violent resistance against the Nazis was morally necessary and even ‘viable,’ and that Jews who allowed themselves to be rounded up and herded to their deaths had not only contributed to their own destruction, but failed in their moral responsibilities. Responsibilities to whom, one might ask. Well, to themselves, Gandhi seemed to be saying, but also to those whose lives they might have saved, to other Germans, and arguably to humanity itself.

In his generally excellent book on Gandhi, Faisal Devji argued that Gandhi's position on the Holocaust belongs within a coherent and *consistent* ideology of moral action through satyagraha. Unlike European anti-fascists (and like many other Indian observers, such as Subhas Bose and Benoy Sarkar), Gandhi refused to see fascism as a special evil. He therefore refused to see in it a circumstance that warranted moral exceptions, Devji wrote, endorsing the perspective. Like Gandhi, Devji conceded that satyagraha would not have prevented the deaths of many Jews, and he too pointed out the obvious: neither submission nor violent opposition succeeded in preventing those deaths. Devji also argued that while the ultimate purpose of politics may not be separable from the preservation of life, Gandhi had committed himself to a 'hard' morality that was separate from, and superior to, the logic of political action. Thus, the preservation of life became a secondary consideration, detachable from an autonomous calculus of 'doing the right thing.' To miss the courage of Gandhi's commitment to that autonomy, Devji wrote, is to sentimentalize Gandhi.

Devji is, I think, too generous to Gandhi on several counts. One has to do with the relationship between information and ideology. Gandhi was aware of a *general* fact of persecution. He knew that Jews in Europe were being terrorized, and even killed, by the Nazi regime: he had received letters from his Jewish friends, and there was of course the news media. But he did not know the particulars; neither, it must be said, did most of those who corresponded with him between 1933 and January of 1948. The episode, for Gandhi, remained a problem of German Jews and their Aryan neighbors: he had nothing to say about Poland and Galicia, or about the wider European implications of the Wannsee Conference. The details that constitute the most visceral content of the Holocaust-as-history, marking it out as something extraordinary – memoirs, photographs and films, archival data and trial transcripts – were only just beginning to filter through in the final two years of Gandhi's life, when he was already preoccupied with the political and human calamity of the Indian Partition. In those circumstances, just as it is unfair to expect Gandhi to have formulated an informed opinion on the Holocaust, it is also a mistake to endow thinly-informed opinion with the dignity of 'ideology,' instead of seeing it as a bit of nonsense to which even Gandhi is entitled.

It is, after all, in the details that the devils of the Holocaust lie. Details differentiate it from counterinsurgency in South Africa and the carnage of the First World War. The assumption that

'fascism is not extraordinary' in the context of the modern state is contentious but defensible, since there is rarely a clear line where the merely oppressive ends and the fascist begins. But to assume that there is no distinction between garden-variety fascism and Nazi practice is much more problematic, and the widespread Indian tendency to see Nazi Germany as just another 'hard state' (that is admirable or objectionable depending on whether the observer is 'right' or 'left' in Indian politics) misses both the trees and the wood. Obviously, the Holocaust was not the original case of mass murder, and Gandhi knew from personal experience that it was not the first time that industrial products had been used against unarmed targets. But Gandhi, who relied heavily on personal experience in the formulation of his ideological positions, had neither direct nor indirect experience of the application of industrial *methods* to murder, in which the factory model was utilized to manufacture death itself. He could not grasp, therefore, what his informants failed to explain, but what those who engineered the shift from Einsatzgruppen to extermination camps did grasp: one cannot appeal to the conscience of 'neighbors,' or make any kind of moral gesture at all, when the neighborhood has been replaced by the assembly line.

It has become increasingly fashionable to see Gandhi as all-purpose critic of whatever is unappetizing about modernity. He fits the bill: he was an eccentric Asian, he had a certain resemblance to Yoda, his writing is shot through with an idiom of mid-Victorian Christianity that was stilted and dated in his own lifetime, and, of course, he *was* a critic of modernity. But there is something dangerously ahistorical in the scope that is often allotted to Gandhi. It covers everything and all periods from civil rights to environmentalism, antiwar politics to anti-corporate activism, British imperialism to the occupation of Palestine. Surely Gandhi had the answer! 'Maoists' in Madhya Pradesh might actually be 'Gandhians with guns'! But Gandhi was a man from a particular time and particular places, dealing with a particular set of issues and enemies. Placing him in situations he did not inhabit even in a library turns him into a Forrest Gump of sorts, and it stretches Gandhian ideology well beyond its breaking point. Gandhi was there when colonial troops savaged the Zulus; it produced a powerful little book. But he was nowhere near the death camps or Josef Mengele's work-station. Nothing that he had to say about the Nazis – or their victims – is especially useful in thinking through that particular form of state terror.

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Military History and the Bangladesh War

History is popularly understood to be a narrative of wars. I mean ‘popularly’ in both senses of the term: not only is that understanding of history ‘mainstream,’ it has many fans, especially on the right. These fans, who are almost entirely male, are commonly known as ‘history buffs.’ (The readership for leftist historiography includes women, but is miniscule in comparison; in no sense is it popular.) The history that ‘sells’ is military history, which is assumed to be right-wing by default. At the college where I teach, a standing joke among faculty worried about enrollments is that they should insert the words “World War Two” into the title of the course, as in “Alternative Chinese Sexualities in World War Two.” Students will come.

Sadly for history buffs as well as historians, there is very little Indian military history. This is not surprising, since military history of the popular sort requires a particular kind of population: the kind that writes, reads and can afford to buy mass-marketed books that stimulate a national identity that everybody agrees upon. In India, that market and the industry that feeds it are only now reaching critical mass. Also, there is not a whole lot to write, read or feel good about, since India has had no wars in which a significant portion of the country was involved. In spite of the ostentatious display of hardware at the annual Republic Day parade in Delhi (which appears Stalinist but is actually colonial in inspiration), the military has had a fairly small public profile in India, unlike in Pakistan or the US. There has never been a draft, no compulsory military service, and very little fighting. India’s wars since independence have all been fought on the margins of the land, by marginal institutions and personnel. None except the first Kashmir

conflict has lasted more than a few weeks. The casualties have numbered in the hundreds or thousands, not in the five, six, seven or eight figures. Most Indians have never encountered a soldier, let alone known a dead one. Hardly anyone would be able to name the current army chief, which can only be a good thing.

Some of that is changing. Since the Kargil skirmish of 1999, there has been a visible cult of military-worship. Cricket stars are now given honorary ranks in the army and promised rides in fighter planes. But military history still remains marginal and under-developed: developing, one might say tactfully. There are a handful of memoirs by retired officers like P.C. Lal, L.P. Sen and John Dalvi, and there is Neville Maxwell's banned account of the 1962 war with China. These are often informative and, indeed, fascinating, but the genre is very small, both in volume and in scope.

So when one comes across a well-written and substantial work of Indian military history, it can be gratifying. Samir Chopra (my colleague at CUNY) and Jagan Mohan happen to be two of the more active military historians of India, specializing in air force history. They recently came out with *Eagles Over Bangladesh: The Indian Air Force in the Liberation War of 1971*: a nice, fat addition to their book on the 1965 air war. A third book – a study of the air war over West Pakistan in 1971 – is in the works.

It should be said at the outset that *Eagles Over Bangladesh (EOB)* is not an academic history. As anyone who has read John Dower, Stanley Karnow or Neil Sheehan will confirm, military history as an academic and even semi-academic discipline has changed tremendously over the past generation: it now not only requires a thorough engagement with the political context of war, but also overlaps with social and cultural history, including histories of race, gender and class. *EOB* has very little of that. It is for the most part a straightforward analysis of battle, and as such, an old-fashioned book of the sort that appeals immediately to history buffs and armchair warriors. If one considers the nature of the project, however, it is a fascinating book that raises some broad questions about South Asian history and historiography. *EOB* 'works' quite well within the limits the authors have set for themselves, but whether those limits are

helpful or obstructive is another matter. So I shall first discuss the book on its own terms, and then take up the issue of what remains to be done in a history of the 1971 war.

EOB is, first of all, a meticulously researched study of one portion of the fighting that led to the bloody break-up of Pakistan and the emergence of Bangladesh. Using sources ranging from interviews and squadron logs to newspaper reports and video footage, Mohan and Chopra provide a vivid picture of the air war in November and December of 1971, from the particulars of individual missions to the processes of operational planning. That thoroughness is occasionally counterproductive. Sections of the book can be tedious: it is really not necessary to detail every mission flown in the eastern sector of the war, or to reproduce every bit of information available on the movement of squadrons from base to base. The authors seem to have proceeded under the impression that information must be included regardless of its value, without first establishing the criteria for what makes information relevant. The result is a methodological slippage: the work drifts periodically from the terrain of the historian, who must evaluate and organize material with a 'so what' question in mind, into that of the chronicler, who wants to catalog 'everything that happened.'

All the same, if one objective of military history is to place the reader in the cockpit or briefing room, the book succeeds. It is absorbing, poignant and witty. Chopra and Mohan write obviously from an Indian perspective and Indian research materials are predominant, but *EOB* is mercifully free of jingoism or cheap insults directed at the enemy. The authors have, in fact, gone out of their way to consult Pakistani sources when these have been available. That has heightened their credibility and enriched the narrative with details and perspectives that would otherwise be lost. This also a well-produced book. The index is frustratingly inadequate, but as if to compensate, an excellent collection of photographs is included.

Not only does the book provide a wealth of information about the operations themselves, at its best it historicizes the war effectively, illuminating the shifting objectives and perceptions of those who planned and participated in it. The narrative confirms that the Indian decision to go to war was taken quite early in the year. By the time fighting actually broke out in late

November, the air force – and presumably the army and navy as well – had spent months planning and training. Squadrons had been assigned their tasks and territories, pilots had been assigned their partners, weapons and strategy had been rationalized, and the modalities of inter-services coordination worked out. This allowed the Indian military to avoid some of the amateurish mistakes it made in the 1965 conflict with Pakistan, not to mention the war with China three years before that. As the Pakistani air force officer Sajjad Haider (who planned one of the most effective operations of the 1965 war) noted wryly, the Indians learned from their mistakes, the Pakistanis did not.

At the same time, *EOB* makes clear that the Indian war effort was not as effortless, lubricated and rational as it is sometimes made out to be. The well-known destruction of the runway at Tejgaon is a case in point. The M-62 bomb which was used with spectacular success in those missions had been in the air force's possession for years; yet few pilots were aware of it, and none had trained with it. The necessary tactics had not been devised or tested. Even after the frustrating and expensive raids on Sargodha in September 1965, the IAF had not bothered to find out what works, and what does not work, in disabling a heavily-defended enemy airfield. Those lessons had to be improvised quickly after another day of frustration and high costs (the December 4 attacks on Tejgaon). Intelligence was astonishingly poor: in spite of the defection of large numbers of Bengali PAF personnel, the IAF had not learned the layout of the airfields in Dhaka, and flew sortie after sortie looking in vain for aircraft shelters and radar installations. There was much wastage of effort, resources and lives: targets were bombed even after intelligence had confirmed they were worthless, simply because attacking aircraft had already loaded up with ordnance and fuel and were ready to go.

Now for what *EOB* does not do, which is also a plea for a different type of Indian military history. 'Air force history' is by definition a troublesome concept: unless the historian is very careful, it remains airborne, abstracted from the mess on the ground. Yet it is the mess that is the stuff of history. The 1971 war is obviously not just about Indian bombing tactics. It is, for instance, also about curious medical nomenclature. In Indian Bengal, the common name for conjunctivitis is *Joi Bangla* (the slogan of the Bangladeshi rebels), because the conflict coincided with a plague of eye infections. A forty-year-old war has remained embedded within language and inflamed eyes. On a more serious level, the war is a complex text of about what went wrong

with Pakistan, and the Indian investment in a particular neighborhood and world order. Chopra and Mohan do try to include a political narrative, especially in the introduction, but it is somewhat cursory: they are anxious to get to the real topic, which is the fighting. The war tends to get cut off from its own political context. (The exception to this is the very good discussion of Kilo Flight, the rebel air force.) This leads of unfortunate errors of omission. There is insufficient discussion of the American posture, which leaves Task Force 74 sailing in a contextual void. The Blood Telegram gets no mention, and the very interesting section on Dhaka on the eve of surrender has no reference to the massacre of the city's intellectuals on December 14 (image below) as Indian forces closed in on the city, although it was one of the most dramatic and sinister episodes of the war.

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1971 is also a highly compelling ideological text of race and gender, which inform the origins and conduct of the war. The conflict cannot fully explained without analyzing anti-Bengali racism in West Pakistan. Where did this racism come from and why was it so pervasive? India also has Punjabis and Bengalis, after all, but their relationship has not been marked by the contempt and violence that emerged in Pakistan. To understand racism in Pakistani history, we need to ask why the Martial Races Theory became institutionalized in Pakistan to a degree that had no parallel in India. It seeped into the economy (as the work of Ayesha Siddiqa shows), into the administration, into popular culture, and of course into the military itself. Any history of the Bangladesh War needs to confront that dynamic.

The Bangladesh War remains to a great extent an unfronted war. The reluctance to confront is, understandably, most acute in Pakistan: not only was this a lost war, it was a particularly shameful one, marked by mass murder and rape. It is not surprising, therefore, that the Pakistani memory of 1971 is marked either by outright denial (there were no massacres and rapes) and blustery accusations (bloody traitors), or by a grudging admission (mistakes were made) that acknowledges neither responsibility nor the scale of the crime. It's similar, in some ways, to the American retrospective on Vietnam.

Other silences are peculiar to Pakistan. Going into 1971, the two most celebrated combat pilots in the PAF were M.M. Alam, with four victories against the IAF in the 1965 war, and Saif-ul-Azam, who had one victory against India in 1965 and three against Israel in the Six Day War. (By way of comparison, no Indian pilot had more than one to his credit.) Alam, in fact, was a much-hyped hero: he was credited (incorrectly) with an absurd number of kills in 1965, including five in a single battle. Pakistan's Air Force Day was created to commemorate his exploits. Yet in 1971, both men were grounded and took no part in the air war. Alam and Saif were both East Wingers. Even that political identity is complicated: Alam was not a Bengali. He was a religious fundamentalist at a time when Pakistani officers were mostly secular. His grounding reflected not so much ethnicity as the politics of faith and zeal in the Pakistani military, which cannot be talked about too openly. But Saif was a Bengali, and shared the fate of other Bengali officers in the Pakistani forces: they were harassed, grounded, imprisoned and worse. None of this is easy to talk about within a narrative of perfidy and treason.

But the Bangladeshi and Indian retrospectives of 1971 come with their own silences. Saif had the chance to leave the PAF before the war; he refused. He had already been humiliated and removed from flying duties, but he chose to sit out the war behind a desk in the West Wing, moving to Bangladesh only afterwards. Many other Bengali officers, who had been trained to think of themselves as Pakistanis, did the same, while others – like A.K. Khandokar and Sultan Ahmed – joined the Mukti Bahini or Kilo Flight. M.G. Tawab left the PAF and moved to Germany, but remained pro-Pakistan in exile. Khandokar, Tawab and Saif all went on to head the new Bangladesh air force. Who was the traitor and who was the patriot? The answer is not

always clear, either for the Pakistani or for the Bangladeshi: salt can be a tricky thing. In a similar vein, the role of the Biharis in the terror of 1971, the savage reprisals against them after the Pakistani surrender, and their internment for years in independent Bangladesh, do not fit the narrative of the Liberation War. The role of Bengali collaborators has only recently entered mainstream political debate in Bangladesh, although it has been simmering on the edge of polite conversation for years.

Then there are the rapes, which defined the conflict as much as anything else. That tens (possibly hundreds) of thousands of Bengali women were raped between March and December of 1971 is both well-known and obscure; it has been shouted from the rooftops and also hushed up. There is a curious echo here of the British narrative of rape-by-darkies in the ‘Sepoy Mutiny.’ In 1857-58, whites who talked or wrote about the ‘Mutiny’ highlighted rape: the imagined violation of white womanhood by natives was a basic justification for counter-insurgency. After the war, the rape-talk suddenly vanished, white women who had fallen into Indian hands did a second disappearing act, and the sahibs themselves insisted that there had been no rape. The restoration of political normalcy required an end to talk of sexual disarray. Similarly, Bangladeshi hesitations on the issue of the *birangana* – simultaneously national heroines and icons of shame – reflect the difficulty of coming to terms with what was, for the women and men of East Pakistan, very much a total war: not a marginal war, as it was for India.

In Bangladeshi discourse, 1971 was a genocide. *EOB* accepts that highly charged terminology at face value. This is not necessarily incorrect, but it is a missed analytical opportunity. How many people were killed in the East Wing by Pakistani troops and their local allies between March and December? Why does the number matter? Three million died, according to conventional wisdom in Bangladesh. That number gives ‘genocide’ a certain credibility. If we look at news reports closer to 1971, the number falls, but still remains very high, in the vicinity of a million. If we look at the Pakistani military’s own report, we have a precipitous drop in numbers, to about thirty thousand. That is also the number given recently by the Indian historian Sharmila Bose in her deeply flawed book (in which she relied primarily on Pakistani military sources). Would thirty thousand still be genocide? Would three hundred thousand be genocide? When Mujibur Rahman was released from Pakistani custody after the war, he tried to ascertain what had happened in his absence by asking aides how many people had been killed. About three lakh

(hundred thousand), we think, they told him. To their shock, Mujib promptly told the British press that the number of dead was 'three million.' Was this the common South Asian error of translating 'lakh' as 'million,' or a deliberate tenfold exaggeration? Whatever the truth, once a number becomes iconic within a national narrative, it becomes almost impossible to walk back, or talk back.

There is an additional problem with talking about genocide in Bangladesh. Who was murdered? Who became refugees? Here we are on firmer numerical ground, since the UN gives us a figure of nine million refugees. The Indian government's figure was ten million. Of those refugees, seventy percent were Hindus, although Hindus were barely twenty-five percent of the population of the East Wing. There can be little doubt that Hindus were deliberately targeted by the Pakistan Army for ethnic cleansing. So although Hindu and Muslim Bengalis were both killed in large numbers, we can talk more confidently about a genocide of Pakistani Hindus. But Pakistani discourse cannot acknowledge this for obvious reasons, and Bangladeshi discourse cannot acknowledge it without fracturing the narrative of *Bengali* martyrdom. Just as interestingly, India has not acknowledged it either. If the Indian government had let on in 1971 that Hindus were disproportionately the victims of the Pakistani military crackdown, the conflict would have become uncontrollable. Mrs. Gandhi might not have been able to gain public support for a war to help Bengali Muslims, and probably faced an anti-Muslim pogrom at home. It remains difficult for Indian nationalists on the left to talk about the killing of Hindus in 1971, because the topic itself holds the door open for right-wing politics of communal grievance.

For Indians who think about military history, 1971 was the 'good war,' almost American in its combination of altruism and righteousness. We acted to save those poor bastards, or alternately, we did nothing until we were attacked. (Which was it? Never mind.) It is an enormously compelling narrative: as Chopra and Mohan's interviews reveal, Indian officers entering Dhaka after December 16 felt like Americans entering Paris after D-Day. That 'American' feeling makes it unnecessary to face details, or even be consistent with details. When did the war begin? December 3, says the accepted Indian narrative, pointing at the PAF raids on Indian airfields. Unprovoked aggression! Yet the first air battles took place on November 22, or November 21 if you count attempted interceptions. By then, Indian Army units were already operating inside East Pakistan. It can be argued with considerable force that the Indian decision to go to war was

morally justified in view of what was happening in Pakistan. Yet the Indians have felt the need to sugarcoat their own medicine with a ‘They attacked us’ myth. Mohan and Chopra don’t try to hide the contradiction; it can be discerned between the lines. But they don’t talk about it either, although these little self-deceptions are precisely what make history interesting.

Sugar-coating the war has made it easy for Indians to forget certain things. For instance, the Pakistani POWs who were sent home instead of being handed over to Bangladesh to be tried for war crimes can be forgotten. The fact that Indian soldiers stood by and watched the Bengali reprisals against Biharis can be forgotten. The hundreds, probably thousands, of East Wing refugees who died in Indian refugee camps can be forgotten. These were mostly children succumbing to malnutrition and disease, in terrible conditions of overcrowding and filth. The Indian government could not provide for them adequately, but it would not let them leave the camps either, insisting that they – Muslims *and* Hindus – must return eventually to Pakistan/Bangladesh. To talk about them would be to concede at least some Indian responsibility in the genocide.

The language of a good war makes it difficult to talk about collateral damage. On the night of December 8, a bomb dropped from an IAF Caribou destroyed the Rahmat-e-Alam Islamic Mission orphanage in Dhaka, leaving a crater thirty feet deep and killing between two dozen and three hundred children. (The different numbers come from different sources.) It was an accident; the Caribou was aiming for the airfield. But the airfield was already out of action, the PAF was already grounded, and in any case, the declared objective of the bombing was merely ‘harassment’ of Pakistani forces in the area. For that, the IAF loaded 1000 lb. bombs on to transport aircraft, and when the crews thought they were generally over the airfield, pushed the bombs out the back. One missed by a mile. Indians don’t talk about this, and the Bangladeshis don’t either: there’s no point in spoiling your Liberation story by bringing up children killed by your own allies. (The French and Belgians know that very well.) The Pakistanis did try to talk about it but nobody believed them, assuming they had done it themselves.

The Indian use of an extremely crude bombing technique in a populated area at night, for negligible gains, can be described only as criminally irresponsible. Mohan and Chopra, to their credit, lay this episode bare, although they also try to downplay it. The bombing was not vicious, after all. It was just some mid-level officer's idea of *jugaad*, or the improvisation at which the Indian and Pakistani militaries have excelled for decades. The Caribou pilots had been asked if they had any objections; no one had raised his hand, because a twenty-five-year old air force officer has been trained to solve technical problems, not ponder the ethical implications of the solutions.

Indeed, one wishes that the authors had told us more about the pilots involved in the 1971 operations, converting their interviews into oral histories. Who were these men? What were their backgrounds, and what drove them? What role did ethnicity play - why, for instance, were there so many Anglo-Indians in the IAF (and the PAF, for that matter), and why did so many of them emigrate to Australia? How did Bengali and Muslim officers in the IAF perceive the war and their role in it? These questions are vital to understanding the place of the IAF in Indian society as well as the internal culture of the air force, and those details matter enormously in military history.

Neither India nor Pakistan has fought a major war since 1971. That in itself is interesting, because between 1947 and 1971, India fought three major and four minor wars. Five of those came in just about a decade, beginning with the eviction of the Portuguese from Goa in 1961. The calm since then reflects the heightened costs of war in a nuclear-armed environment, and perhaps a more stable neighborhood, in which some irregularities – like the East Wing – have ceased to exist. Ironically, military-consciousness in India has emerged in this atmosphere of relative peace. This is, I think, a very good thing, because it allows for a more contemplative and 'comprehensive' military history, which begins with the presumption that modern wars are fought in society as much as they are fought in bunkers and cockpits. Restricting our field of vision to the latter not only limits our ability to grasp the big picture, it also replicates a segregation between the bazaar and the cantonment, which ultimately allows soldiers and civilians to disavow complicity in the actions and ideologies of the other. Chopra and Mohan have one book on 1971 left, and I hope they will approach it as a challenge to write a fleshed-out and nuanced military history, engaging with a wider scholarship on the place of war in modern

South Asian society. They would then be doing full justice to the demands and possibilities of the genre.

January 24, 2014

Posted by [Satadru Sen](#) at [8:56 PM](#)

The Maid and the Diplomat

The diplomatic ‘crisis’ that has flared between India and the United States over the arrest of Devyani Khobragade, the Indian vice-consul in New York, is what is called a tamasha: entertaining farce. It is of no real importance, but an awful lot of people are looking on with interest, exhibiting various degrees of vitriol, righteous indignation and amusement.

For those who have not seen an Indian newspaper lately, or read the American papers carefully, the basic story is that the vice-consul was arrested for having paid her imported maid, Sangeeta Richard, a decidedly sub-minimum-wage salary. She is also alleged to have lied about Richard’s wages on the visa application she submitted to the US government. Richard went AWOL last summer, and this week an ambitious federal prosecutor (is there any other kind?) Preet Bharara – Indian-born, as luck would have it – had Khobragade arrested, strip-searched, cavity-searched, thrown briefly in jail (‘with drug addicts and common criminals’), and charged. The maid, it turns out, was not missing at all, but working with Bharara’s office. Her family has been since then ‘evacuated’ from India and spirited to safety in the US. They’re all here somewhere,

hiding from RAW assassins and NDTV reporters. If found guilty of the charges against her, the vice-consul faces ten years in prison.

Indians are upset. They understand, correctly enough, that a strip search and cavity inspection constitute a sanitized sexual assault, and nationalist patriarchies are highly sensitive to sexual encroachments. They also suspect, again correctly, that US diplomats are treated with greater indulgence by the Indian authorities than their Indian counterparts are in America. So American diplomats have had their diplomatic privileges sharply reduced by an Indian government determined to show its toughness in the run-up to elections. The various political parties are competing for the Most Patriotically Outraged prize, and it is not all posturing: people are quite genuinely outraged.

All of this was unnecessary. In an ideal world, the Indian government would issue its diplomats with instructions that occur naturally to the rest of us: if you can't afford a maid, make do without. The US government, which has conducted itself with spectacular clumsiness and stupidity, would know better than to engineer a diplomatic incident where a discreet warning (or better visa processing) would have done the job. And no prosecutor with an eye on the governor's office would presume to 'evacuate' foreign citizens from their own country. These outcomes reflect poor coordination between bureaucracies, arrogance, and probably a measure of racism as well. If in doubt, play the scenario in reverse: female American diplomat, suspected of underpaying an employee, being made to spread her cheeks for the police in Delhi. The New York Post editors would die of joy. But I too love a good tamasha, and this one has all three elements of a really good one: race, class, gender.

So I marvel at Ms. Khobragade, who is barely denying that she provided false information on the maid's visa application and then quietly negotiated a second agreement, for a lower salary, with the maid. Nor is she denying that when the maid threatened to go to the authorities if she was not paid her legally due minimum salary (and compensated for the extra hours she had been made to work, being an Indian servant), she tried to have her arrested, and got an Indian court

to issue an order blocking the maid from filing a civil suit. She is either not very bright, or befuddled by a runaway sense of entitlement.

In the vice-consul's defense, this sort of visa fraud is probably very common. The American officials who processed Richard's visa application could easily see that a diplomat who earns \$4000 per month could not pay her maid *more* than \$4000. Yet the visa was issued. Obviously, these things are usually handled with a nudge and wink, and prosecutors who want to demonstrate their American credentials are not on hand to make trouble. Khobragade can hardly be the first Indian diplomat to have brought her servant with her on these dubious terms.

But what strikes me most sharply about the vice-consul is how utterly provincial she is. Here is a highly-educated woman who has signed up for a career in the Foreign Service. Yet she remains the typical Indian memsa'ab, who must have servants to boss around. Her standing in life, her sense of her own worth, and the normalcy of her world all depend upon it. Of course, the servant has to be Indian, accustomed to a particular idiom of command and deference. When Ms. Khobragade came to New York, she never left Bombay. She had no intention of seeing, let alone absorbing, local norms of housework, dignity, employer-employee relations and legality. She has no idea that she has done something wrong, and does not understand – or care to understand – why others might feel otherwise. Such people, who are essentially tourists with the expectation of immunity to consequences, are the worst kind of diplomat. Yet they are the norm and not the exception. The Ugly American is in good company.

The same provinciality and entitlement are evident in the Indian media's complaints that the vice-consul was treated like a 'common criminal,' locked up with 'drug addicts,' and so on. There is no reason to assume that Ms. Khobragade is an uncommon criminal, after all, or that she is morally superior to somebody whose major vice is substance-abuse. Strip searches and **body-cavity inspections** are indeed 'barbaric,' as the Indian government noted in its protest against the vice-consul's arrest. They are rituals of power and humiliation dressed up as security measures, like much of law enforcement in America. Now, it would be one thing if Ms. Khobragade's sympathizers were outraged that *anybody* should be treated in that manner. But

their outrage is rooted in an obscene distinction between common and uncommon people: it is apparently acceptable to violate the bodies of the former, but not of the latter.

It is precisely this distinction – that differential assessment of the worth of human beings – that leads to the exploitation and mistreatment of servants by their employers. It is also why middle-class Americans seldom make a fuss about how the police treat their victims. They know that these rituals are intended for a different demographic from themselves, although the expectation of ‘uncommon’ treatment is rarely naked. Indians, on the other hand, let it all hang out. When Shah Rukh Khan was profiled by American airport officials a couple of years ago, Indians protested not because a Muslim had been harassed, or even because a brown man had been harassed, but because the dumb firangis had failed to treat an uncommon man with uncommon respect. Had it been some other brown man, or a poor man, they wouldn’t have cared. And, of course, poor brown men and women face this sort of shit every day: in New York, in the Gulf states, at Heathrow. There’s no national outrage there.

Ms. Khobragade faces two sets of charges: one having to do with visa fraud, and another with the exploitation of an employee. The first accusation seems irrefutable, but the second is more interesting. To some Indian and most American observers, the exploitation is obvious. As per US and NY labor laws, Sangeeta Richard was entitled to a minimum wage of nearly \$10 per hour, for a maximum of 40 hours a week. She was also entitled to vacation time. Instead, she was working longer hours, and instead of getting four thousand dollars a month, she was getting about five hundred.

The issue, however, is not so straightforward. First of all, people who depend on cheap labor overseas to maintain their First-World lifestyles are in no position to be self-righteous about exploitation. And American diplomats abroad don’t pay their native employees an American minimum wage. Secondly, like most live-in servants, Ms. Richard had a free place to live, food, clothing and medical care. So it is not quite true that she was being forced to survive in Manhattan on \$500 a month. Had she wished, she could have saved or remitted her entire salary, which is precisely the expectation in these arrangements. If I had five hundred dollars

left over every month after all my basic expenses had been met, I would be delighted. So would anybody who is actually paid the minimum wage in America. And \$500, which works out to thirty thousand rupees, is a middle-class salary in India.

Ms. Richard clearly agreed in advance to the lower salary. She cannot claim to have expected four thousand dollars and then been surprised to receive five hundred. She is an adult who entered into an agreement with Ms. Khobragade; nobody forced her to take the job. It can, of course, be argued that she was forced by poverty, but if we take that position then we effectively argue that the poor have no agency or accountability. In any case, Richard was not in dire poverty before she accompanied the vice-consul to New York. Her father works for the US embassy, and she herself has worked for an American diplomat in the past. She appears to have known what she was doing.

That does not, however, mean that there was no exploitation. When you pay someone \$500 a month to be your live-in servant in America, you render that person totally dependent upon you and your goodwill. This is especially true if that employee has limited English-language skills, no driver's license, and no local structure of social support: friends, family, alternative options for employment. At that point, notions of consent and contract become unsustainable. Employers often hold on to the passports of their servants, hold wages in arrears, or pay in rupees (which means the servant has no access to her own earnings while in America). When Sangeeta Richard wanted to take a second job, she needed Khobragade's permission, and permission was refused. Moreover, we are not talking about just any employer: Khobragade, as vice-consul and employer-patron, had nearly total power over Richards' visa status in America. Khobragade clearly counted on that power, which is why she refused to allow her maid to take a second job. Also clearly, she was willing to abuse that power: when Richard left and Khobragade complained to the police, she had to be reminded that Richard is an adult. Khobragade filed charges of petty theft against her maid, when clearly the missing property was the maid herself. She assumed that she was dealing with a common servant, and did not consider the possibility that the servant might be a smarter, cannier player of the system than herself, converting a disadvantage into an effective immigration plan for herself and her family.

December 19, 2013

Posted by [Satadru Sen](#) at [9:49 PM](#) [Links to this post](#)

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The Indian Election

The BJP sweep in the state-level elections in India last week is, quite possibly, a foreshadowing of what is to come in the national election next spring. The confidence of my lefty friends that Narendra Modi will not be the next Indian prime minister may have been more wishful than realistic. With that in mind, I wanted to write a few lines on the prospect of Narendra Modi as PM.

We should be clear-eyed about what the BJP revival means, and what it does not mean. It does not mean a new wave of Hindutva and anti-Muslim bigotry. Antipathy towards Muslims has not gone away – far from it – but there has been no spike, no reprise of the hysteria of the early 1990s, with its bizarre ‘chariot rides’ and spectacular vandalism. The recent ‘riot’ in Muzaffarnagar was reprehensible, but it was nothing like the carnage in Bombay in 1992 and Gujarat ten years later. The BJP victories are about other, more prosaic things: the economic slowdown, the glamor that Narendra Modi has acquired as the messiah of corporate India, and above all the dismal performance of the UPA government. Had Manmohan Singh stepped down after his first term in office, he might justifiably have been remembered as an effective prime minister who had followed through on a coherent agenda of governance. But in his second term, Manmohan has become something between a joke and a sad apparition: a man asleep at the wheel, or not even behind the wheel. The responsibility for this state of affairs is mostly Sonia

Gandhi's, who has done to Manmohan what Putin did to Medvedev, but that simply underlines the reality that the PM is not responsible even for his own disappearance. Meanwhile, the Gandhi family has offered nothing of substance except corruption and arrogance, hounding a bureaucrat who blew the whistle on shady land deals and trying to preserve the status of Parliament as a safe-house for criminals. The BJP is just as corrupt and high-handed, but has the advantage of being in the opposition.

Given Manmohan Singh's vanishing act, the climate is right for a new politics of omnipresence, i.e., an emphasis on personal leadership. So we have Rahul Gandhi versus Narendra Modi, which is arguably a presidential rather than parliamentary confrontation, consistent with the Indian middle class' aesthetic preference for America over Britain. In that confrontation, Rahul Gandhi is at a disadvantage, because although he has had more than enough time in the limelight to establish himself as 'leadership material,' he has been either too lazy or too unintelligent to do so. It is, I think, the former. What Rahul says – about criminals in Parliament, about the Muzaffarnagar atrocity – suggests the existence of insight and even principles, but they also suggest a terrible lack of consistency and organization. Modi, on the other hand, is nothing if not focused and organized: a man who knows what he wants and leaves no doubts about his seriousness. He will never win a majority of votes in an all-India election, but given the uninspiring opposition, he might win just enough to be the dominant figure in a new governing coalition.

Modi appears to fulfil a long-standing fantasy of a segment of the Indian population – the urban middle class – that, while beleaguered by the rise of subaltern and semi-subaltern voters, still retains the power to articulate the template of national leadership. What this class has wanted since the turn of the last century is a particular type of man at the head of the nation: a man capable of the well-informed, clear-eyed, rational and decisive use of violence. That capability, after all, is at the heart of the liberal nation-state that emerged from Bismarck's Europe. In India, the 'man' who best represented this ideal in the PMO was Mrs. Indira Gandhi, but Vajpayee, Nehru and even Shastri came close.

Modi's apparent proximity to this model of statesmanship is misleading. He is fundamentally a provincial man, without the worldly education and historical awareness required to represent or even understand the national interest in the world. His amply-demonstrated capacity for violence is suited not to the calibrated deployment of naval squadrons but to street-fighting, i.e., to the petty viciousness of domestic politics and organized rioting. Even his style – the garish fancy-dress, the gratified acceptance of the worship of supplicants – is easily recognizable as the aesthetic of provincial politics in India, reminiscent of southern film-star politicians, Mayawati's pink elephants, and Mamata Banerjee's zeal in covering Calcutta with posters and billboards of herself.



In thirty years of Left Front rule in West Bengal, Jyoti Basu and Buddhadeb Bhattacharya never became so omnipresent in the public eye, but they were liberal, middle-class politicians. (There were images of Mrs. Gandhi everywhere in Calcutta in the 1970s, but they were mostly cartoons drawn by the communists. Now, of course, cartoonists and communists are both visited by the police.) Mamata, Mayawati, Modi and the Southern gods represent what might be called a subaltern take on fascism. It's not the real – i.e., 'European' – thing, either as fascism or as liberal democracy, although it has elements of both. Modi as PM would be just as prone to triggering fits of nervous laughter as Mamata Banerjee has shown herself to be. But even subaltern fascism must be taken seriously as a dangerous political product.

The biggest difference between Modi and Mamata, obviously, is Modi's barely disguised hatred of Muslims. This is not necessarily his best selling point, but many voters who are uncomfortable with it have learned to accept it as an incidental imperfection in an otherwise desirable package of right-wing economic policies. Many more take for granted that being anti-Muslim is the core of right-wing nationalist ideology in India. Yet right-wing Indian political thought has a long, parallel history that is *not* anti-Muslim. We can trace that history not only to Benoy Sarkar and more problematically, Subhas Bose (who was both of the left and of the right), but as far back as the essayist Bhudeb Mukhopadhyay, who was Bankim's contemporary. Bhudeb was a self-identified conservative; his views on the Hindu family, Indian womanhood, caste, and the relationship between society and the individual were consistently reactionary, although not anti-modern. Indian nationhood was real and distinctive, he argued, and sought to recover and conserve the distinctions. Like Bankim, he was uneasy about Muslims: their extra-Indian enthusiasms were too evident for his liking. But he also insisted that Hindus and Indian Muslims belonged to a single moral and social world, that Indian Muslims had more intimate bonds with Hindus than they did with Arabs, Iranians and Turks, and that Islam would become progressively indigenized in India until Muslims were no more alien than Jains and Sikhs. In this, he preemptively rejected a basic premise of Savarkar's Hindutva: the notion that India was the exclusive *punjabhumi* or sanctified homeland of some religious communities but not others.

Bhudeb's Hindu conservatism did not prevent him from teaching in a madrasa, and from regarding the ulema with deep empathy and respect. He recognized the social and political divides between Hindus and Muslims in his own time, but pinned the blame firmly on Orientalist scholarship (history in particular). He placed the major responsibility for bridging the divide upon his fellow-Hindus, who were, he recognized, already the economically and politically dominant community. In this, he foreshadowed Benoy Sarkar, although unlike Sarkar, Bhudeb wrote at a time when the ins and outs of Indian nationhood were still falling into place.

What Bhudeb, Benoy Sarkar and Subhas Bose acknowledged, and Bankim, Savarkar and Golwakar did not, is that an Indian nationalism that is anti-Muslim at heart is fundamentally self-defeating; it cannot be otherwise. No state that excludes, demonizes or discriminates against thirty percent or even twelve percent of its population can be stable, peaceful or effective, especially when twelve percent adds up to well over a hundred million people. Such a country will remain at war with itself and crippled by that war. And that war is precisely the sort of provincial, primitive use of rusty swords and tridents that sustains a politician like Narendra Modi. It features secular citizens slipping into a rhetoric of 'us' and 'them' in casual conversation, landlords rejecting prospective tenants because they are Muslim, of harassment by the police of a man with the temerity to marry a Hindu woman, 'encounter killings' of college students, and the occasional pogrom. It is far removed from the grand visions of global strategy that the Indian national elite has entertained since Bankim turned Krishna into Bismarck. The irony of the middle class' willingness to embrace a small-time bigot like the murkhya-mantri of Gujarat is precisely that it diminishes its own pursuit of the global big time: a place in the sun, credible and projectable power. It reduces would-be giants to dwarfs. India with Modi as prime minister will probably not be Nazi Germany, but it will be a small-town circus complete with animals and clowns, in which jackals imagine they are lions (from the Gir Forest, naturally).

December 8, 2013

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In Two Languages

Long before the kid was born, we had decided to raise her bilingually. The word ‘decision’ is not quite right; it was simply an assumption, born from middle-class parents who take for granted the validity of a particular streak of contemporary American liberalism. It runs against the grain of the assimilationist dogma of immigration and citizenship, in which learning (or retaining) languages other than English is either a sort of cultural treason, or a belated educational dalliance that must be carefully segregated from things like identity and real life. It is, of course, quite close to the *practice* of immigrant culture in American history, in which the first generation tends to speak Italian or Russian or Chinese, the second generation is bilingual, and the third speaks English only. But the hegemonic discourse is that of the fourth generation, which insists that its great-grandparents went straight from Ellis Island to ESL classes and never looked or talked back.

Even in Park Slope, a neighborhood populated mainly by hipster dads with babies strapped to their chests and tattooed moms with designer strollers, our strategy is far from ubiquitous. When we meet ‘mixed’ couples in the playground or park, we find – more often than not – that the immigrant parent has acquiesced to an English-only approach, albeit embarrassedly. Here, as in other American cities, when it comes to families in which both parents are middle-class Indian immigrants, English-only is the norm, not the exception. Partly, this is because it’s convenient: the parents themselves often speak different Indian languages and communicate with each other in English. Partly, it’s an ideological position: urban-middle-class Indians don’t think of English as a foreign language, and it might be suggested, a bit unkindly, that our colonial baggage makes English-only a matter of pride. Certainly there is no dearth in Indian cities of parents who habitually speak English with their children even when they’re all capable of conversing in Hindi or Bengali. They’re reminiscent of nineteenth-century Russians of a certain class, who spoke French amongst themselves. When that set emigrates, raising their ABCD children bilingually is an anti-priority. Indian languages signify what they strove to leave behind even before they had left.

For me, the calculations were different. I emigrated in my early teens, half-formed. Bengali was the sound of something lost that had to be restored. So although I had never been a Bengali-chauvinist, had routinely come close to failing my Bengali exams, and shared my cohort’s prejudices against the products of ‘vernacular schools’ (having never given any thought to the

fact that both my parents went to Bengali-medium schools), the preservation of language became a strategy of self-preservation, and literature a necessary sanctuary. Neither the only sanctuary nor a fortress, I should add, but one of several homes that I refused to relinquish, and that, like any meaningful home, I want to bequeath. And for my wife, whose enthusiasm for raising our daughter bilingually has been more stubborn than my own, Bengali was not only a language she had struggled to learn in Bangladesh and India, it was also a basic part of being married to me: not altogether different, I suspect, from the color of my hand or the sound of my voice.

The plan was simple enough: I would talk to our daughter in Bengali, and the wife would use English. Very soon, however, I became skeptical about what we were doing and its chances of success. First, there was the suspicion that the girl was being subjected to an unnecessary, confusing and ill-advised experiment. (She was, at the same time, being sprinkled with Spanish at her daycare center: ‘agua’ and ‘leche’ were among her first words. Simultaneously, there was an infusion of Hindi, for she enthusiastically sings along with me to ‘Tum ho meri dil ki dhadkan’ and demands that we sing ‘Chanda hai tu’ on a daily basis.) Second, and more powerful, was the intimidating nature of the pedagogy we had chosen. A language is not merely vocabulary, after all, or even a combination of vocabulary and grammar. It is the intersection of crowded lives: an infinitely broad web of experiences, enveloping bird-calls and truck-horns, the fading of daylight and half-remembered music, overheard quarrels, subtle and violent registers of formality, sarcasm, rage and lust, and the dialects, accents and word-choices that indicate class, place, gender and generation. To assume that one person can communicate all that in solitary conversation was insane.

We persisted nevertheless, and it has worked better than I had dared to expect. Even the ‘lag’ that bilingual infants are supposed to experience in their verbal development has been miraculously bypassed, and we have a girl who is not yet two but precocious in two languages, and adept at knowing when to switch from one to the other. ‘Want go downstairs,’ she informs me. Not paying attention, I don’t quite catch it, so she explains: ‘Nichey jabi.’ Like any urban-Indian child, she effortlessly mixes the vernacular and the global: ‘Mama read-to-you korbe’ (‘Mama’s waiting to read to me’), she tells me diplomatically when she’s tired of our lessons. And there was something shocking in the realization that she now knows nearly all of

the first volume of *Hashi-Khushi*, Jogindranath Sarkar's illustrated alphabet primer that has been a rite of passage for Bengali children since 1897. She loves the whimsical poems and drawings of *Hashi-Rashi* (1899), and will probably take easily to Sukumar Ray, whose father Upendrakishore's writing for children was first published by Sarkar's press. Suggestive continuities lurk everywhere in these extremely compact histories of being South Asian.

And there lies the rub. Sarkar's primers are a foundation of modern Bengali, but they reflect a historical moment that is only ambiguously 'alive' in the present time. The illustrations are of little boys and girls in dhotis and saris, although some of the girls have already made the switch to dresses. The mothers wear *ghomtas*, or the end of the sari draped over the head in a half-veil. The locations are unmistakably East Bengali, rustic and riverine: lost, in more ways than one, to the lived world of Indian Bengalis. '*Li-kar* jeno digbaji khay,' Mira recites ('*li-kar* turns a somersault,' although it comes out suspiciously like '*li-kar* jeno tiktiki khay' – '*li-kar* eats geckos'), but the *li-kar* is a dead letter: it no longer exists in the Bengali alphabet. I cannot think of a single word that uses it; it was already dead when Jogindranath wrote *Hashi-Khushi*, and twentieth-century primers soon dropped it from the alphabet. It lingers in *Hashi-Khushi* like a stranded ghost. And as for 'tiktiki khay,' the only gecko that Mira has seen is a photograph above the stairs of our Brooklyn apartment. That particular tiktiki used to live behind another photograph on the wall of my father's living room in Santiniketan. Both occupants of the room are long dead and gone, but the original photograph, which shows my father standing stiffly in front of the library at MIT, now hangs in my mother's living room in California, sans lizard.

The Bengali that my daughter is learning, and about which I am gloating, is therefore removed from her in more than one way. Teaching it necessarily involves omissions, because some fossils and lost pieces – the *li-kars* and geckos – are beyond explanation. The ubiquitous drawings of river-boats have no automatic association with bhatiyali music for her. Even the paper boats (which must become river-boats in the imagination) are foreign beyond translation, and one man in New York City cannot convey the melancholy of bhatiyali to a toddler. It is quite reasonable, under the circumstances, to wonder what all this is for: what kind of acculturation can it possibly achieve? I am reminded of an ABCD freshman who came to my office one day, and upon realizing that I speak Bengali, happily began an extended conversation, throughout which she addressed me in the familiar 'tumi' form (equivalent to Du in German or tu in

French). She was unfamiliar with the 'apni' form (Sie or vous) that would have been appropriate; her parents always used 'tumi' with her, after all. So for all I know, I could merely be teaching the CD in ABCD.

The pessimism is probably unfounded, or rather, not founded in the right place. Each generation of modern Bengalis that absorbed the alphabet-culture of Jogindranath Sarkar and other second-wave producers of Bengali children's literature (if we consider Vidyasagar the first wave) has absorbed, essentially, a world of dislocation. Colonial Indian children's literature was always a narrative of novelty, not timelessness: making sense of it, rearranging it, salvaging something from it, but also accepting it. The illustrations of dhoti-clad boys on paper boats rowed by ravens were not, after all, intended exclusively for children in villages on the banks of the Padma. The bhatiyali that I heard in my childhood came entirely from the record player, and although there were people around who remembered and translated the original context, that context too was probably more imagined than real, shaped by migration, forgetfulness, and filled-in gaps between what you know and what you are supposed to know on account of your identity.

What the kid does with her Bengali will ultimately be her business, not mine. It will be different from what I did with my languages. She will probably go through a period when speaking an obscure foreign language is an embarrassment, and will need to rediscover the language on her own. What she discovers then will not be what I am trying to teach her now. But that's just fine, because what matters is not accuracy in the reproduction of culture but creative nostalgia for imagined pasts: the ability and desire to improvise what we call 'heritage,' and which is valuable not because it is real but because it is substantial, and because it, like a photographed lizard on a wall, contains a shadow of something real.

October 6, 2013

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Fear of a Black Chamberlain

In some ways, the Obama administration's attempt to engineer an attack on Syria fits an established political and rhetorical pattern. Last weekend, Secretary of State John Kerry brought out the M-word – Munich – and by doing so, implicitly used the H-word. A fourth-rate power that can barely hold itself together became a great menace to the world, requiring preemptive military action by another old fraud, the Free World. In America, nobody laughed – nobody in Washington or in the respectable media, at any rate. This is, after all, a known script that we dust off and read to each other every few years. Gaddafi was Hitler, Saddam was Hitler, bin Laden was Hitler, now it's Assad's turn. And where there's a Hitler, there might be a Chamberlain. The ritual has a certain solemnity to it, like handling a flag, and in this corniest of political cultures, playing along is the key to respectability. Bill Keller of the New York Times – a most respectable courtier – dutifully wrote an editorial announcing that Americans reluctant to attack Syria were being 'isolationist.' (Never mind the hundreds of foreign bases, Afghanistan, and the ongoing drone wars in at least three countries. This is 1938, so we must be isolationist.)

Playing along with rituals, however absurd, is the stuff of historical continuity. And what continuity! One of the most astonishing revelations of the Snowden files is that classified NSA documents were meant to be read only by American, British, Canadian, Australian and New Zealand spies. Not even the French or the Germans had access, never mind their willingness to cooperate with the NSA. Ah, the intimacy of the 'special relationship.' The French might be eager to bomb Syria – it's excellent advertising for Dassault, and a new Syrian regime might buy

Rafales to replace their destroyed inventory – but when it comes to that iconic creature, ‘the Allies,’ there is no wavering from a stubbornly, romantically, Anglophone fantasy. Empire evidently never graduated from the class of ’45, and everybody knows that the French, Russians and Chinese never really belonged in that class. But who knew that New Zealand has spies? (Who do they spy on? Fiji?) Or that Canada is so important, eh? Or Britain, for that matter? Not even Putin knew, to the embarrassment of David Cameron, who began sputtering unconvincingly about a great past. What is this ‘special relationship,’ anyway? Could something as matter-of-fact as intelligence-sharing and strategic cooperation really boil down to the sentimentality of a shared language? Then again, no language, not even French, is as enmeshed in the culture of empire as English. But why should New Zealand be ‘in’ and Jamaica be ‘out’? They speak English too, don’t they? Oh wait...

Then there is Israel. Another special relationship, but differently special, in which the dog has accepted the power of the tail in a way that would confound Gramsci. One of the less reported aspects of this Syrian crisis is the frantic lobbying for war being done by AIPAC. It would be impolite to report such things, and Abe Foxman might make unpleasant insinuations. But why would Israel want the US to attack Syria? Well, it would weaken Hezbollah and isolate Iran. But the Israeli government has indicated in the past that it is not keen to see the Assad regime – which is barely a nuisance – replaced by something unknown, unpredictable and chaotic, especially since the anti-Assad rebels are unlikely to be friendly to Israel. The neo-con calculation that applied in Iraq is discernible in Syria but not very strong. But the rhetoric of gas and Munich is irresistible all the same, in exactly the same way that the rhetoric of saving-the-world is irresistible in American politics. It sustains a national consensus on why-we-exist, why-we-do-the-things-we-do, and why-our-priorities-are-so-incredibly-fucked-up. It soothes and reassures even as it frightens people into letting the government into their pants and email accounts.

There is, nevertheless, a pattern of diminishing returns. And this time around, it has become apparent, even Americans are not buying it. Congress may yet buy it, but it looks shockingly uncertain. The British clearly did not buy it. (When was the last time you wanted to stand on your chair tipsily and sing God Save the Old Bag? Well done, Parliament.) The Germans are being rather hostile, which is not surprising if people are going to bring up Munich. And so we

have the utterly pathetic spectacle of the American president going around literally begging people to please, please, let him drop just a few bombs, just for a few days. He cannot really explain why. He cannot say that it is about saving face, although he comes close. He insists that ‘the world’ drew the ‘red lines’ behind which he is trapped, but doesn’t dare go before the UN General Assembly. He insists that chemical weapons are heinous, but won’t talk about what a Hellfire missile or [white phosphorus](#) does to a child. He cannot say why a massacre in Syria is intolerable and one in Egypt acceptable. The press is doing its best to help by refraining from asking rude questions, but in the end, it may be the Russians who save his face by conjuring up a diplomatic solution. That would make Putin the winner in this sorry affair.

Meanwhile, I find myself marveling at the farce that Barack Obama has become. It cannot be called a tragedy; there is no nobility here. But at one time, this man knew people like Rashid Khalidi and Bill Ayers: thoughtful, honorable men, men with ideals to which they were committed. It is reasonable to think that they really were friends; Barry probably inhaled. It is difficult now to imagine them in the same room together. Could Obama look them in the eye? The people who would still want to have a beer with him are AIPAC lobbyists, Wall Street cronies and thugs like Keith Alexander. It may very well be depressing for Obama to realize that being president has brought about this startling inversion of his social and moral circle. It certainly raises the question whether he understood, in 2008, that this was going to happen, and if he would still have run for president had he understood. Perhaps it makes no difference to him. The more depressing thing is that *we* – who voted for him, made phone calls for him, donated to his campaign and cheered his election – now realize that no matter who Obama was in 2008, it was always going to end in farce.

September 9, 2013

Posted by [Satadru Sen](#) at [10:39 PM](#)

Algorithms

After Edward Snowden became a public figure – blowing the whistle on the US government’s extraordinary surveillance of its own citizens, not to mention the citizens of other countries – quite a few commentators complained that Snowden, not the US government and the NSA, had become the focus of media attention. Their point was well taken: there can be little doubt that the attention paid to the messenger diverted the mainstream media from the message itself, saving the Obama administration from sustained public scrutiny and debate. Over the past several weeks, however, as Snowden has remained holed up in the no-man’s-land of a Moscow airport, under threat of being handed over to American authorities, the complaint has become insupportable. The messenger and the message are not two separate stories, one less important than the other. It is quite apparent that they are both pieces of the same story of power and its abuse. Snowden is the human face of that story, and it is hardly his fault that most commentators in the US are unable or unwilling to see that his fate is actually a microcosmic enactment of the fate – and indeed, the possibilities – of democracy and responsible government in this country and others.

Through its relentless and illegal pursuit of Snowden, preceded by the essentially pseudo-legal treatment of Bradley Manning and Julian Assange, the Obama administration has displayed the same unappetizing traits that are reflected in its secret courts, secret judgments, secret interpretations of laws (that amount, effectively, to secret laws), and secret policies of surveillance that erode the Constitution (which has the great flaw of not being secret). There is, for instance, the penchant for bullying. Obama, Holder and their pals in Congress have gone after a solitary man – a man without an army, powerful allies or unlimited resources – who dared to challenge and embarrass them. They cannot claim to be upholding some lofty principle of the law: none of this vindictiveness was in sight when the same administration refused to prosecute or even investigate the abuses of the Bush-Cheney regime. Not one torturer faced the courts, not one policy-maker was hauled into court; it was all ‘look ahead, not behind.’ James Clapper lied blatantly to Congress – a felony, incidentally – without so much as a slap on the

wrist from the Department of Justice. Not one of the men involved in the Haditha massacre did jail time; the bankers and CEOs who wrecked the economy were protected and rewarded. Trigger-happy pilots and drone operators who blow away civilians like boys playing video games are protected from the sight of the public, lest anybody take offence or suggest punishment. It is those who insist upon showing that are hounded and punished. This is not simply hypocrisy. Like all forms of bullying, the persecution of Snowden and Manning is also a straightforward sign of cowardice. These men are politically defenseless, unlike the torturers, bombers and CEOs.

Moreover, the governmental instruments and agencies that might afford the bullied some defense – what is, ideally, known as due process – have themselves been corrupted so badly that due process can only be a cynical joke. What sort of justice (which is what awaits Snowden, one US government spokesman ominously declared some weeks ago) can be expected from a regime of kangaroo courts, black sites and indefinite solitary confinement? And more broadly, what kind of democracy can be expected from a regime in which every branch of the government has become complicit in illegalities, to the extent that the only sure legality is secrecy itself?

The degree of the cynicism with which Snowden, Manning and the rest of us are confronted is particularly evident in the behavior of the two veteran legislators from California, Dianne Feinstein and Nancy Pelosi, both Democrats, and both of whom have gone out of their way to defend the NSA surveillance program. Years ago, as a teenager in San Francisco, I met Ms. Pelosi. It must have been before she was a member of Congress, although she was already in the DNC. I forget now what the forum was – probably Model UN. Even then, I was startled by how intolerant and, well, brainless she was: a party hack defending the party line from teenage critics, without a thought of her own. It is not that Feinstein and Pelosi are especially invested in specific surveillance programs, beyond their own complicity. They are easily recognizable as machine politicians: what matters to them, more than anything else, is power. That means doing absolutely anything to maintain themselves and their party in office, but it also means being obsessed – to the point of total identification – with the machinery of the state itself.

Unlike the classical machine politicians of the days of Tammany Hall, who actually interacted with ordinary voters and their petty corruptions, the new machine politicians serve, and function as, mechanisms of pure, cold, concentrated violence. The public is either irrelevant or an irritant. Nancy Pelosi in her expensive pantsuits exhibits the same dead-eyed form of power and arrogance that hides behind a policeman's sunglasses or a bureaucrat's computer monitor. She and her colleagues continuously enforce a militarism that is so normative that it does not register as militarism. They enforce, simultaneously, a corruption that does not register as corruption, because it has been legalized at the level at which governments and corporations operate. (And that, of course, is the difference between the West, where there is 'no corruption,' and the Third World with its cash-filled suitcases.) How naïve we were when we assumed that Barack Obama would remain a creature of human dignity in a state in which oversized police cars bristle with more antennae than warships and are referred to as 'cruisers' and 'interceptors'! There was no other possibility, not because Obama is a Chicago man, as one might be tempted to say, but because he is a hollow man who entered the machine. (With Hilary Clinton, of course, there was never any doubt that she was already of the machine.)

The element of ordinary self-interest in American machine politics is easy enough to identify: the government is secretive, selective and violent because it suits the proverbial one percent that circulates between company boardrooms and government offices. And what the Snowden affair has shown is how ubiquitous and incestuous such elites are. What we have seen is not so much mutual back-scratching as a veritable circle-jerk of the governments of the US, Britain, France, Germany, Italy, Spain, Austria and even Russia: the big bully and his catamites, who are also little bullies. The rulers of each of those countries, and quite a few others, have shown themselves to be a single tribe of power, organized as a network of gangs hidden behind metaphorical sunglasses and computer screens, guns and badges, cruisers and interceptors. No democracy left behind! Jimmy Carter said as much recently in *Der Spiegel*, to the general indifference of an American media that paid more attention to the pregnancies of nincompoops. (Even *Der Spiegel* left the story out of its English edition.) Carter's point, however, was not just about the determination of politicians, bureaucrats and their corporate cronies to line their pockets while pretending to 'defend' the public. It was about the nature of the modern state itself, which has become entirely inconsistent with democracy.

That development, obviously, is as old as the democratic state. Gandhi wrote about the shamelessness of Parliament and its connection with violence in *Hind Swaraj* more than a hundred years ago, and he was not the first; his insights remain valid today, as do Orwell's and Huxley's on the statecraft of 'security' and soma. Heinrich Böll's novels of the 1960s and 1970s show that even an apparently unaggressive and 'reformed' society like West Germany was its own violent, secretive empire of power. When Böll protested against the Adenauer-initiated fetish of 'normalcy' in the West German state, he was not saying that Adenauer had returned Germany to Nazi times; he was, rather, pointing out the brutal normalcy of a type of modern bully-state that included the Third Reich as well as the Federal Republic. Norman Mailer said the same thing about the United States, more or less at the same time.

But whereas present-day Germans are still able to make those kinds of connections (between the Stasi on the one hand, and Angela Merkel's BND on the other, for instance, thanks partly to the East German interlude – it's not surprising that the only significant public protests against state surveillance have come in Germany), Americans are locked into a model of citizenship that includes absurd levels of anxiety, deference, syrupy sentimentality and the worship of uniformed personnel. Germans would have found it familiar – in 1913. When strangers are urged, every year, to approach random soldiers with 'Thank you for your service, sir,' and shops offer discounts to military personnel in the same way that small-town merchants give discounts to high-school athletes, the garbage about permanent war and giving aid and comfort to the enemy becomes a pervasive stench in the air we breathe. We learn to hold our own breath and concentrate on shopping. Any information that is not advertising becomes dangerous, subject to 'collection.' Trying to locate an old friend recently, I Googled his name. Within minutes, my Yahoo page was asking me if I wanted to find low prices on Lincoln Wong, whose name had been interpreted as a brand by some well-behaved algorithm. This could be either amusing or disgusting, depending upon your mood at the moment. But that algorithm is the model American citizen today.

Gandhi, Orwell, Huxley, Böll and Mailer inhabited a world in which certain balances of power still existed, and those balances – like the Cold War, or Non-Alignment, or anti-colonial nationalism – allowed for the existence of politics (real politics and not circle-jerks) that

generated spaces of resistance and asylum. And in the disappearance of the prospect of asylum for Edward Snowden we can see the full extent of what has been lost.

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Posted by [Satadru Sen](#) at [9:23 PM](#) [Links to this post](#)

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A Jarawa in Munich





In Munich last week, I attended a conference on the Andaman Islands. The other participants included academics and activists, Europeans as well as Indians. There were, of course, no Andamanese present. It would be unthinkable these days to have a conference in Australia or North America about issues that concern aborigines, without including aborigines as participants. But the organizers of the meeting in Munich can hardly be blamed: everybody knows that there are no Jarawa anthropologists or Onge activists, that there are fewer Andamanese than there are Australian aborigines or Native Americans, and that the Indian authorities would not allow them to travel to Germany. So we ended up in a rather old-fashioned colonial ritual of talking about people who are acknowledged to be alive, but for whom self-representation would be unnatural. It was as if the Andamanese have been consigned to a state of political death, or something below the condition of human life: 'bare life' confined to a camp, the philosopher Giorgio Agamben might say. This reflects perfectly the mainstream discourse of 'what to do about the Andamanese,' but for that very reason it is (or ought to be) deeply disturbing. Not only should we – i.e., those operating within liberal-nationalist discourses of communities and the state –

hope to see a Great Andamanese historian or two at conferences a generation from today, we should expect to see Onge activists at conferences *now*; we should, likewise, refuse to see the Andamanese as people in an advanced state of extinction, who can do nothing except die continuously.

These expectations and their apparent quaintness are both rooted in the history of aboriginality and citizenship in India. The viability of the Jarawa in Munich requires that we confront, first, what it means for natives to have their own natives; second, the fractures and gradations within that lower level of nativeness; and third, some practical aspects of the problem at hand, when it comes to aboriginal populations. All of these dynamics have been shaped by the historical, ideological and political realities of articulating nationhood in a colonized society, although other political and, indeed, ethical considerations can also be identified, especially when it comes to the problems of the present time. When we think about indigenous or aboriginal populations in the context of the modern state, we tend to slip into a mode of analysis that is borrowed largely from settler-colonial situations. But when it comes to post-imperial nation-states like India, the settler-colonial model has obvious limitations. This does not invalidate or eliminate the relevance of categories like aborigine and indigenous, but it shifts their meanings and their political purposes. The larger society and its political institutions adapt to these new meanings, and certain expectations are formulated regarding the place of the aborigine in the national body and the state. The new meanings and expectations can, in fact, be liberating and democratic. But when this shifted, or recast, discourse of indigeness encounters a more conventionally settler-colonial model of aboriginality, as in the Andamans, we have an impasse for which no resolution has yet emerged. This impasse is closely tied to a particular notion of racial purity and morbidity. Within its logic, we assume that a certain kind of aborigine is particularly 'pure,' and as such, particularly vulnerable to dying of impurity. Being well-meaning liberals, we seek – with infinite clumsiness – to forestall that eventuality by insulating them from everything that

does not fit our understanding of their identity, including concepts like ‘activism,’ ‘democracy’ and ‘rights.’

When Indian nationalists at the turn of the century looked at groups like Santals and Gonds, or the so-called ‘tribal people’ of the Indian mainland, they saw an anomaly of race and civilization, i.e., creatures located within anthropology, not history. There was, however, more to the context. From Bankimchandra Chatterjee onwards, the search for universal and positivist markers within Indianness were accompanied, in the same individuals, with an obsessive search for what was distinctive, i.e., different from what was declared to be universal but tacitly understood to be European. These compulsions and desires led to a very particular ideological development, which is not only the invention of the adivasi, but also the location of the adivasi *partially* within the folk.

The possibilities of that location become clear if we look briefly at Benoy Kumar Sarkar, who was the most prominent Indian social scientist in the period between the world wars. Sarkar held out a model of locating the aboriginal within the national that was both right-wing and democratic – more democratic, in fact, than the vaguely leftist paternalism that undergirds Indian policy in the Andamans today. Between 1917 and 1922, he made a concerted attempt to identify an Indian race. His objectives were both descriptive and prescriptive: not only did Indian identity have its roots in the tribe and the folk, it should be embraced as such. Just as pertinently, there was no sharp line between tribe and folk, and it was with this grey area between tribe and folk, between the forest, the village and the small town, that Sarkar became fascinated. Tribes shaded into the folk, and functioned as a soil out of which the modern national community grew. Cultural anthropology became a legitimate and alternative national history.

Sarkar thus represents a way of thinking about race that is undoubtedly elitist but also inclusive, determined to look beyond – and below – the colony to find the postcolonial nation. His construction of early India was based on a Romantic conception of wholeness that was itself a rebellion against Orientalist narratives of the Orient. Sarkar understood that the ‘Oriental’ tended to be either all-spirit or all-body. Wholeness – and hence humanity – was the preserve of the European. Here, Sarkar made a direct intervention in the discourse of race. Culture itself became the stuff of bodies, as much as it was the stuff of poetry. The discovery of the unrestrained, uncivilized body became the revival of the 'optimism,' or culture infused with political action, that enables change, politics, history and justice. This conception of culture was affiliated with the anti-liberalism that Andrew Sartori has identified in Bengal after Bankim, but it was neither entirely reactionary nor divorced from liberalism.

It was the investment in physicality, among other things, that took Sarkar beyond the urban culture of Brahmo-influenced *bhadrata*, with its stifling emphasis on restraint, to the rustic world of folk and tribal culture. He developed, firstly, a particular outlook on folk culture: it is necessarily part of the nation, but it is also an externally located asset that must be identified and nationalized. Secondly, Sarkar was very aware of his location within a wider Hindu race that had seen centuries of internal ‘circulation of elites’ (he borrowed the expression from Pareto) and in which the classical ‘Aryan’ elements had constantly been infiltrated and mongrelized by the marginal, aboriginal, and mongrel. Sarkar was happy to embrace the mongrel aspects of his Hindu identity, but it was a jittery happiness: it was secure only as long as the right sort of Hindus were in charge of the boundaries of the community. The ‘right sort,’ however, were not the existing urban elites, but an emerging vanguard that could come from unexpected places, such as the margins of the folk world.

Sarkar's long collaboration with Haridas Palit might be seen in this context. Palit came from a very poor, Namasudra background, which he advertised even as he advertised his rise to respectability as a lawyer, educator and activist. His humble origins on the margins of Bengali society became an asset in the formulation of his subsequent social status: it gave him access to knowledge that the born-respectable did not have. Whereas Sarkar had left provincial Malda for the cosmopolitan world of Calcutta and Leipzig, Palit had remained on this inner frontier of Bengali culture, facilitating what might be called an inward-directed cosmopolitanism. Like many contemporary collectors of folk culture, he cultivated a reputation as a wanderer in places dislocated in time, a man uniquely in touch with the illiterate and the tribal. He introduced Sarkar to his specific interests, such as the Gambhira and Gajan festivals of rural and small-town life; these quickly became Sarkar's own areas of investigation.

Rituals like the Gambhira and Gajan appealed to Sarkar for multiple, layered reasons. They were provincial, rural, Dionysian, nocturnal, hidden, lost, glimpses of the past in the present, glimpses of a true – or at any rate, alternative – racial Self, political community and form of knowledge. Because the primitive precedes modern political identities and politically frozen boundaries, stilled migrations and disrupted contacts, the folk and the tribe could function as the level of an ancient cosmopolitanism. What had been locked into a colonial hinterland could prove to be a means of 'traveling' in a world of folks and tribes. Similarly, the folk produced new links between Indians of various regions, showing (in Sarkar's words) that 'notwithstanding the narrow provincial spirit of the modern educated Indians, due to the growth of habits and sentiments in watertight administrative compartments, the soul of India is really one.'

By seeing a national 'soul' in the folk, Sarkar echoed the German Romantic-nationalist Herder, but with a significant distortion. For Sarkar, diversity was valuable within a unified national project. At the Gambhira, he wrote, the observant ethnologist would find not only peasants and

tribal people, but also ordinary Bengalis dressed as ‘Santhals and other aboriginal tribes,’ dancing wildly, their bodies pierced by burning arrowheads. Folk culture thus brought out racial confusion and provocative fusions, which were highly desirable to the native in search of racial wholeness. Sarkar’s was not a search for racial purity; it was, rather, the deliberate searching out of ‘impurities’ as the new substance of race, or a reconstitution of race in the colony.

Within Indian academia, Sarkar engaged with P.T. Srinivas Iyenger and C.V. Vaidya on the foundational questions of ethnographic nationalism in India: the reality (or otherwise) of an Aryan race, its origins, and its relationship to non-Aryans. Iyenger was dismissive of the idea of a race with foreign origins, seeing the Arya-Anarya distinction as merely a difference of ‘cult.’ Vaidya, on the other hand, was inclined to celebrate the ‘Aryan invasion’ theory of early India, positing clear ethnic and political lines between Aryan settlers and Dasyu ‘aborigines.’ Sarkar was more receptive to Vaidya than to Iyenger, but he inserted caveats. Race, he felt, develops historically, through the gradual accumulation of ‘impurities’ and the development of political purpose. He agreed that Dasyus were aborigines, distinct from Aryans. But he was not interested in fetishizing Aryans as the exclusive insider-race in India. There were multiple insiders, Aryan and non-Aryan, and he wanted them all as his ancestors. That anthropological diversity was a discovery – or at least the claim – of unexplored nooks and crannies of ancestry and origin, which was exciting to a man invested in a *world* of exploration.

Indeed, the fluidity of ethnic interpenetration was highly desirable to Sarkar, because it reflected the operation of political power – the ebb and flow of armies and peoples – without which India would be reduced to unworldly irrelevance. The compulsively miscegenating, politically alive folk could be mined for the masculinity and militarism the elites desperately wanted, especially if its deepest racial origins were unearthed. We find, here, Sarkar suggesting that the folk constituted not only a racial root, but also an alternative bedrock of the Indian state, and a basis

of anti-colonial politics. Whereas the administrators of what Nicholas Dirks has called the 'ethnographic state' of British India imagined a menagerie to possess, manage and enjoy, Sarkar was proposing a counter-state *of* the menagerie, in which primitive rituals demonstrated the repossession of the state by the racialized.

The particular racial qualities that Sarkar desired were, however, also dangerous, in need of control and repression. At a time when the Criminal Tribes Acts were still very much in effect, folk militarism was the other side of the delinquency of entire populations. What made the state viable was precisely what the state must manage constantly through punishment and education. Folk festivals function in Sarkar's narrative as an ancient national education, explicitly described as being both moral and political. Crucially, we find that education has taken on a distinctly democratic appearance: it is not just a top-down process of the urban elite teaching the rabble, but of the rabble teaching themselves, and even teaching the elites a lesson or two about town planning, sanitation and governance. The knowledge of modern civic life is thus democratized and diffused throughout the body politic, and democracy was nothing less than the secret history of the folk.

The idea of the democratic nature of tribal society was not new, but Sarkar brought it to bear on the wider community of Indians through the mechanism of the folk. Folk festivals revealed the existence of submerged indigenous elites in the villages of 24 Parganas, and even Taliganj, he wrote. The most authentic Indians could thus be found right on the edge of the colonial metropolis. Describing the worship of Mangala-Chandi in this proximal margin of colonial civilization, Sarkar insisted that this folk goddess was in fact the guardian angel of every Bengali home. He was suggesting that folk traditions serve as multiple bridges, connecting the *bhadralok* world with the world of peasants, the world of peasants with that of tribal people, the culture of the present with the distant past. This connectedness fleshed out the nation, reducing the gap

between those who value culture and those who constitute culture. Just as importantly, it established the private interior of the home, as opposed to the public altar of the temple, as the secret location of folk tradition: at heart, therefore, the *bhadralok* are also part of the folk. Indians were, among other things, an emerging tribe.

Sarkar was not saying that Indian folk rituals constituted modern statecraft, or that villagers were the ‘real’ modern Indians. Rustics in a particular imaginary mode were *like* modern citizens, or useful shadows of the modern citizen. As a tongue-in-cheek reference to the Welsh as the *mlechcha* of England indicates, Sarkar knew he was dealing in ascribed identities and utilities. But just as the European folk could function as a bedrock and a foreshadow of European modernity, the Indian folk was a thrilling vision of the modern in the primitive and the primitive in the modern, akin to seeing a ghost. As in any Romantic project of recovering the folk, that ghostly element was reinforced by an anxiety – both sharp and decadent – that the folk were dying out, destroyed inexorably by a vulgar modernity that could not be disavowed. But the very awareness of that death could be racially invigorating. Sarkar quoted the poet Baradacharan Mitra as saying that ‘We should, all of us, do our best to see that ancient festivities of Bengal like those of the Gambhira do not die out.’ It was by becoming aware of racial loss that modern Indians could realize their race as a new political truth.

We thus have in Sarkar the construction of an indigeneity that is simultaneously internal and external to the national self. And this is a very basic aspect of the *adivasi* as a paradigm of indigeneity. It is not quite the Self, it is dangerous, it is subject to morbid anxieties, but it is also intimate and admissible. For the non-*adivasi*, it promises a receptable – temporal, spatial and racial – for that part of the modern self which is at odds with the generic, mundane, liberal framework of the democratic state. It holds a part of the self in abeyance, as it were, from a subjecthood with roots in colonialism. And that is precisely why it is democratic: it permits, in

theory and to some extent in practice, a two-way movement, between modern citizenship and aboriginality. So Jaipal Singh – hockey star as well as adivasi activist – could pose with either a hockey stick or a spear, and Sarkar could be either a sociologist armed with numbers and charts, or a Romantic receding into the fog of ‘exotic’ folk traditions.

Even during the debates of the 1950s surrounding Verrier Elwin and tribal policy, it was understood that tribals represented a primitive *Indianness*. So we can talk about adivasis being exploited and their lands being stolen, just as we can talk about peasants being exploited and their lands being stolen, but we cannot reasonably talk about adivasis and their land being *colonized*, because that word brings with it assumptions about race, political community and membership that do not apply. Indeed, the concept of the adivasi is a rather elegant resolution of modern India’s problem with the primitive. It is an updating, rather than a total replacement, of older, extra-colonial notions of the porous boundary between wilderness and civilization. Within this resolution, extreme forms of violence and exploitation have persisted, but that is partly because the boundary has been poorly managed by the state.

That framework, however, falls apart when we look at the Andamans, because it becomes clear, here, that not all aborigines are adivasis. It is useful to go over what is different in the Andamans, at the risk of stating the obvious. Firstly, the Andamans are both literally and metaphorically islands in the mainland Indian imagination: belonging to the nation, but cut off from the nation.

Secondly, that dislocation has been most acute when it comes to the Andamanese, who entered Indian discourse very differently than did the tribals of the mainland. Santals and Mundas did not have to wait for the British in order to become known to Indians, or even to be known *as* Indians.

H.H. Risley and company had no monopoly on the processes of knowing. The Andamanese, on the other hand, came to India largely through British mediation. Under the circumstances, the Andamanese that Indians conceived remained fundamentally alien: accidental discoveries, as it were, unsupported by indigenous discourses of familiarity and kinship. They entered India not as the semi-open category of the *adivasi*, admissible into folk and nation, but as the fully closed category of the *adeem janajati*, too fragile for contact with the world beyond the reservation.

It is not surprising, therefore, that the Indian-national encounter with the Andamanese has been colonial, and on at least four interconnected levels. At one is the straightforward business of expropriation: the various kinds of crowding out, hemming in, and encroachment, enabled and justified by the total displacement of one set of ideas about land, space and ownership by another. At another is a museological-zoological outlook: tourism operators getting Jarawas to dance, but also, at the level of the intelligentsia, relegating the Andamanese to the status of museum objects and a species that might become extinct. We do not use the rhetoric of extinction with the Santals or the Welsh, no matter what the circumstances. The third is the issue of ethnocide. The fourth is political exclusion, which enables all of the others.

What links these various predicaments together is a question of coming and going, which is familiar to us from the *adivasi* debates of the 1950s. At the heart of what Elwin and others debated were the questions: can non-*adivasis* ‘go to’ *adivasis*, and can *adivasis* ‘come to’ the nation-state? Because *adivasis* are unquestionably Indians, both these questions were ultimately answered in the affirmative, although obviously coming and going were not going to be on equal terms. But *adeem janajati* are not unquestionably Indians, and the imbalance of coming and going in the Andamans has corresponded to this exclusion. Outsiders can go to the Andamans: the very existence of the place is an invitation to colonization. But more pertinently, the Andamanese cannot come out, literally and metaphorically. Not only can the Jarawa and Onge

not leave the tribal reserved without quickly being escorted back, they cannot leave an ethological-administrative category that admits of no change, movement or agency.

Why can't they come out? Why can't they want to cross what has become a *kalapani* in reverse: a forbidden expanse of water and jungle, but even more than that, an expanse of race? It is worth remembering that Tasmanian aborigines – not long ago regarded as an 'extinct race' and close cousins of the Andamanese – have since 'come out' of extinction, not by Jurassic Park style cloning or a sudden outbreak of fecundity, but by a radical alteration of the concept of aboriginality that did away with the insistence on racial and cultural purity, and placed control over the boundaries of aboriginality in the hands of the aborigines themselves. It is possible, now, for the Australian cricketer Jason Gillespie to be an aborigine without having to prove his purity or 'looking' a certain way. Likewise, it should be possible *now* for an Onge or Jarawa to travel to Munich and talk to scholars and activists about what they want, to marry a German anthropologist or a Turkish cabbie or a Tamil journalist, and have children who are still Onge or Jarawa if that is what they choose to call themselves. They need not become activists; they are already activists, because their everyday relations with people on the margins of the reservation – settlers, policemen, poachers, Adeem Janajati Vikas Samiti workers, anthropologists – are, and have long been, marked by resistance, negotiation and political agendas. They are not 'innocents,' and to treat them as permanent innocents is the worst kind of mismanagement, not least because it puts them in a situation reminiscent of the lions in Gir Forest: an enclosed population, that can be wiped out by a few HIV-positive policemen or truck drivers on the Andaman Trunk Road.

This is where we come to the issue of ethnocide. We should be extremely careful about using terms like ethnocide when it comes to the Andamans. When we do that, we make a fetish of race that inevitably produces ethnicity as a fossil, and makes being Andamanese inseparable from the

condition of the dying primitive. It's not all that far removed from the imperial decadence of wringing one's hands at the inevitable death of the savage. Obviously, it is too late now to 'not go' to the Andamans. That boat has sailed; the idea of total isolation is a fantasy. But it not too late to react prosaically, realistically, to the impact of the boat people, which means making it easier for the Andamanese to come out, instead of focusing on sealing them off from the outside and seeing contact and change as racial death. I do not pretend to know how this should be done, although basic steps like access to education, information, voting rights, health care, the courts and the media would have to be at the core of any program. But we should begin by accepting that the Andamanese are not more special, or subject to extinction, than Bengalis, the Welsh or Tasmanians. They would then at least have a chance to reformulate their ethnicity and their political relationship with others. They *might* no longer be Jarawas or Onges, and that might be a loss. But it is more damaging, and more colonial, to think of it as *our* loss.

June 29, 2013

Posted by [Satadru Sen](#) at [8:06 AM](#) [Links to this post](#)

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Wankfest: The Academic Conference

Conferences, those central rituals of academia, are not all the same. Some are small and intimate, tucked away in a corner of a single university department; others are enormous and as impersonal as the Hyatts and Hiltons at which they are held. But there is nevertheless a certain predictability about the institution: a common promise of what is most enjoyable as well as all that is disgusting about being a working scholar.

The big conferences are typically annual affairs. For North-America-based scholars of South Asia, historians in particular, the most important of these are the AHA (American Historical Association), the AAS (Association of Asian Studies), and the South Asia Studies shindig in Madison, WI. The first is especially notorious. Being the major site of job interviews for historians, the AHA meeting is pervaded by the smell of fear. There is, for instance, a blue-curtained area where the poorer schools (which cannot afford hotel suites) hold their interviews, and rows of young men and women sit miserably with clammy palms and increasingly rancid suits. Even scholars who are not on the market feel a fat icicle penetrate them unnaturally when they walk past: they are transported, for a second, to being twenty-nine, 'finished' and unemployed. The AAS is less stressful than the AHA, but even more officious: 'volunteer' Brownshirts stand guard outside the conference rooms to make sure that nobody without a badge (i.e., who has not paid the hefty conference fee) gets in to steal the wisdom on offer.

Madison, in comparison, is a laid-back holiday, a sort of fall break devoted to meeting old friends and enemies, and to general debauchery. (It is the University of Wisconsin.) Around midnight, the elevators in the hotels around State Street open their doors to streams of unlikely couplings, booty calls are made, and the halls echo with the muffled cries of intellectuals in ecstasy. I used to go every year when I lived in the Midwest, mainly for the social side of the affair. A good friend from Glasgow, with the look and manner of a young Kirk Douglas, would brush off a small cloud of ardent graduate students, put away an astonishing number of beers, pay for the drinks of his envious friends, and go off to his room to sleep – alone. Curiously juvenile games are played at the panels. One woman used to glare reproachfully at me, to remind me of a disappointing evening in Delhi. Another would always show up at my panels, but inevitably walk out just as I was about to read my paper. I am ashamed to note that I retaliated in kind. Perhaps I started it; it became hard to remember. I enjoyed going to Madison, but I don't miss it.

There are a fairly limited set of ‘types’ that may be found at any given conference. There is the compulsive self-promoter: usually an ambitious sort who has not managed to climb the ladder as far as he would have liked to. A friend and colleague, who I have known for many years, epitomizes this type. Happy to have found a familiar face in a sea of unfamiliar visages in the ballroom of a generic hotel, clutching your drink coupon, you may find yourself engaged in pleasant conversation with this woman. All of a sudden, she will spot – across the crowded room – an editor or a scholar more famous than either of you. Before you can say what the fuck, she will have shot across the hall like a guided missile. If you sidled up, you would hear the sounds of vigorous posterior-kissing, name-dropping, back-biting and self-praise, interspersed with polite exclamations. (Before you accuse me of biting back, dear reader, please note that I have named no names.) ‘She’s such a good networker,’ a mutual acquaintance says defensively. Indeed she is.

Then there is the acknowledged big shot, more evident at smaller conferences. He knows – or believes, at any rate – that the audience has been waiting for him. His entrance is a strut that would put P. Diddy to shame. Like Diddy, he has his entourage: a small, smug train of favored students and junior scholars. He also has his wife, who is typically a younger Indian scholar and his former graduate student, who has married up and is now well-placed in the field. He is, of course, the subalternist. (Sometimes he is just Ashis Nandy.) He is indulgent to his entourage, but otherwise disinclined to waste time on them: they are beneath him. (It’s all very Gramsci, you see.) He reserves his egalitarian-democratic impulses for other subalternists, not for subalterns. He may find himself approached by the occasional self-promoter like my friend mentioned above, and he may even adopt one temporarily, but there is no question of friendship or loyalty. If you were a young scholar up for tenure but not a full member of the club, you would be well advised to watch your back.

The panels themselves are often interesting for the wrong reasons, most of them anthropological. We observe, for instance, that academics have not fallen under the spell of the clock: they tend to treat time-limits on individual presentations as an inside joke or a quaint suggestion. Audience members sometimes fall asleep: my old dissertation advisor would do this

quite regularly. Nudged awake by his amused neighbor, he would smile good-naturedly and resume his gentle snoring, which never dampened the enthusiasm of the delinquent ignoring the clock. Discussants, particularly women from the subcontinent (for some reason, Delhi more than any other place), often give the impression that they eat their young, tearing into paper-presenters and colleagues with a ferocity that takes your breath away. (At a recent conference, one such spirited historian was asked by her co-panelist – a distinguished anthropologist – whether this was really necessary. ‘You’re a pompous ass,’ she shot back into an open microphone.) When you recover from your shock, you realize that these are people who take the business of being intellectuals extremely seriously. They believe their blathering matters in the world, even when they work on the minute details of Maratha taxation.

Not surprisingly, sooner or later at every conference worth its salt, comes the great Call For. This is an arcane concept and needs some explanation. The Call For is a paper presented, typically, by a big shot. But it is identified as such by a new member of the big shots’ club. The act of pointing it out is, in fact, a ritual of admission into the club. Following the conference, it will emerge – in an edited conference volume, or an article in the *American Historical Review*, or at least a well-received monograph – that in Washington/Philadelphia/Madison, so-and-so ‘called for us’ to chart some hair-raising new territory, like the intersection of caste, land revenue and Adorno in mid-nineteenth-century Bengal, or the marginality of left-handed women in nationalist narratives of penal transportation. Apparently, while my advisor slept and I doodled airplanes in my conference-issued stationary, the rest of the audience had thrilled to this clarion-call and gauntlet-throw, and some alert young scholar had recognized the paradigm shift. Now this individual had given the signal, and an army of South Asianists, shuddering with purpose and solidarity, was ready to march off into battle against no one in particular, giving the signaler a prominent place in its midst.

Conferences are, I find, rather lonely spaces – even Madison. The longer they last, the more depressing they become. This is, no doubt, due to my inability to regard my own profession with the required seriousness. But it is also because conferences bring out the eroded condition of friendships and old loves, and the fraudulent nature of collegiality, which seldom rises higher than one-upmanship, narcissism and cliquish behavior of the sort patented by middle-schoolers. In the worst cases, you find yourself doing it too. I’m always happy to leave and take a shower.

May 27, 2013

Posted by [Satadru Sen](#) at [10:21 AM](#)

A Hindu, a Jew and Two Taliskers

Wednesday nights are special this semester, because I have an unusually long day at the office. By the time I get back to Brooklyn, it's usually 11 pm, which means I've been commuting, teaching, grading and in meetings for nearly fifteen hours. At that point, I'm nearly desperate for one of the great pleasures of the week: an hour or two at the pub, sitting near the fireplace with a Talisker, a hamburger and a book. It feels like...detoxification. On a lucky night, the crowd is sparse and quiet, and I can feel the bass from the live music in the basement coming through the floor and the sofa.

Last night, however, things went awry. I had barely ordered the food, sat down in the cavernous armchair and fished out my borrowed copy of Robert Gellately's *Consent and Coercion in Nazi Germany* when I realized that a man had twisted around in his seat and was staring intently at me. He was only about six feet away, so it was difficult to ignore him. And he did look familiar. So I squinted back, trying to make an identification. 'Professor Sen?' he asked, and I brightened a little, thinking it might be a colleague I'd met at a conference. 'I was in your class,' he said, and my heart sank. Fuck. Queens had followed me all the way along the Jackie Robinson Expressway and Eastern Parkway to Brooklyn. Just when you think it's spring break, it's not.

The ex-student walked over to join me and introduced himself, at which point I remembered him right away. Nearly my age and a lawyer to boot, he had been one of the better students in the class a couple of years back: confident, highly engaged, an asset in discussions. He was well-traveled: he had been to India, and unlike most students, knew where Assam was, what a Mizo was, and so on. He had, in fact, not been a student at all – he was simply squatting the class. (I learned yesterday that he has also squatted Indian history classes at Hunter and Brooklyn College, with varying levels of enthusiasm on the part of the professors.) When he had begun to show up in my classroom, I had mentioned it to the department chair, but neither the chair nor I had seen the ‘ghost student’ as a problem. We had tacitly agreed to not make an issue of the fact that he was not enrolled at the college, let alone the class. Some of us at CUNY are like that only. We indulge our eccentrics.

So while I was a bit crestfallen to have my Wednesday night detox disrupted by the tox, clearly it could have been worse. (A bad student, for instance.) I hope you don’t mind talking about Indian history, my new companion said. My head reeled, but the spirit held firm. Of course not, I said politely, resigning myself. Then he saw the Gellately on my lap. “What do you think of the Jews?” he asked.

“What do you think of the Jews” is, under the best of circumstances, a very indelicate question. It’s like being asked about some particularly intimate detail of one’s sexual preferences. When asked by a near-stranger and former student with an unmistakably Jewish name, it’s almost paralyzing. I don’t think of ‘the Jews,’ I replied bashfully, hoping he would either get the hint or take offense and leave. Instead, he looked stricken, which made me feel bad. So I reassured him that I did sometimes think about particular Jews.

That led to a long and unbelievably strange conversation, none of it about Indian history. I spent several minutes defending Noam Chomsky against the usual charges. My new friend speculated

that Whoopy Goldberg ‘had a Jewish slave-owner.’ (He was joking.) At one point, he tried to persuade me that since the Chinese mistreat the Tibetans, only anti-Semites would make a big deal about the Palestinians. At another point, he insisted that Zionism was incompatible with liberal democracy, and I found myself arguing *for* Zionism, giving a short, chaotic, Talisker-fuelled lecture on the differences between Herzl and Jabotinsky, and discreetly raising my glass to Jinnah. In my exhausted condition, it felt like an out-of-body experience.

The man sitting across the table from me was not a bigot, a hardline Zionist or a card-carrying AIPAC representative. He liked Palestinians and wanted justice for them. But he was also compelled to reflexively defend Israeli policy in the same breath as he criticized it. It was as if he was arguing with his own ethical apparatus, afraid that any concession would be tantamount to aid-and-comfort-to-the-enemy, afraid that the enemy was everywhere and that people were out to get him. Beyond a certain point, arguing with him by asking him when he was last discriminated against, or whether present-day Irish Americans should be paranoid because “it could happen in the future,” felt like bullying. He was a decent man caught in the web of ethnicity and identity politics, unable to get away from the notion of ‘my people,’ which is of course the same thing as the notion of ‘those people’ or ‘the Jews.’

A running thread of the conversation was a question, directed at me: why do you care about them, the Palestinians, those Muslims? Why did you care about Bosnia, about Afghanistan, about the Pakistani victims of President Drone? Aren't you a Hindu? Considering the fact that I was quite willing to tell him he was speaking from a ghetto of his imagination, it was a fair question. I did not have a chance to answer, mainly because I needed to think the answer through. But he did tell me that he reads my blog, so this is as good a forum as any for a response. It is precisely because I am a Hindu that I care about Muslims. It has nothing to do with secularism or ideologies of tolerance, on which Hindus have no monopoly. But being Hindu connects me to a larger civilization – a place, a society and a history – to which Muslims also belong. That makes them ‘my people,’ just as my being Bengali makes Punjabis and Tamils ‘my people.’ It brings a sense of responsibility, and with it, guilt and cantankerousness. There are also more general considerations of justice and anti-colonial solidarity, but the ethnic foundation is undeniable and not entirely separate. We are not so different, the Jewish ghost-student and the irritated Hindu ordering a second whisky. (My companion did not drink at all.

He was just squatting the pub. Or maybe he was a spy, engaged in the vital mission of checking out obscure South Asianists in the basement of academia.)

It is hard not to feel that one's ideals of justice should be based on something more generous and less Romantic than parochialism. But perhaps parochial identity is a good place to begin.

March 21, 2013

Posted by [Satadru Sen](#) at 10:48 PM [Links to this post](#)

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Wars of the Emasculated

Benoy Kumar Sarkar and Japan

With few exceptions, male Indian nationalists from the 1890s on defined their predicament in terms of two great intertwined shortcomings: the lack of manhood and the lack of a state. The more cosmopolitan among them read the problem as part of a wider Asian predicament: the condition of the 'little man' cowed down by the hulking physicality of the imperial West. The powerlessness of their nation in the world was, after all, an extension of their own powerlessness in the streets and beds of colonial cities, or, for that matter, the vulnerability of Asian immigrants in America. In all these places, they and those with whom they identified were forever at risk of being assaulted or brushed aside by soldiers, sailors, policemen and railway guards, not to mention civilians wearing the most basic badge of the racist state: white skin.^[1] Moreover, powerlessness in the world naturalized their humiliation in their own country, because as the sovereign state became the necessary fulfillment of nationhood and modernity, it became self-evident that only those endowed with agency on the world stage truly deserved the dignity of manhood at home.

After the Japanese naval victories over Russia in 1905, however, manhood-in-the-world came to the rescue of the castrated-at-home. The equation of 'Asian' with 'weak' and 'effeminate' was undermined, because not only had an Asian race prevailed over Europeans, it had done so in the form of a state, equipped with all the paraphernalia of modern statehood: steel ships, long-range guns, admirals, diplomats, the rhetoric of tactics, strategy and national self-interest. The heavily armed state, able to project power across the sea, compensated for feminized immobility and passivity of the native in the colony. Moreover and almost miraculously, this development had coincided with the radicalization, intensification and popularization of Indian anti-colonial agitation, especially in Bengal, following the Curzon administration's decision to partition that province. For Bengalis armed with pens, newspapers and a few unreliable pistols and grenades, 1905 was – at least retrospectively – the Year of the Asian Man.

It is in this context that we might locate Benoy Kumar Sarkar, the most prominent Indian social scientist of the period before independence. Sarkar was a brilliant and, within the limits of the colonial predicament, renowned scholar-activist. He took the entrance examination for Calcutta University at the age of thirteen and stood first (in 1901), received the prestigious Ishan scholarship, plunged into the National Education project (eventually playing a pioneering role in building up the engineering college of Jadavpur University), lectured extensively in the United States, Italy and especially Germany (where he spent some of his most formative years), and left a sizable population of former students and admiring colleagues when he died in 1949.^[2] He read, published and lectured in German, Italian and French in addition to English and Bengali, and experimented with new methods of teaching Sanskrit. Drawn deeply into revolutionary political thought after the partition of Bengal, Sarkar developed quickly into an enormously prolific writer on Indian nationhood, culture and history. He also became a 'China expert' of sorts, and a leading theorist of Pan-Asian solidarity, internationalism and cosmopolitanism. In a contentious intellectual and ideological setting that included Ghurye and Sarda, Nehru and Savarkar, Sarkar articulated a concept of the Indian people that drew from cosmopolitan as well as Volkisch imperatives, seeking to negotiate Darwin and Gobineau on the one hand and Manu and the Mughals on the other, with Nietzsche and Mill mediating, as it were. The tensions within and around those boundaries of Indianness are still with us.

Beyond the hagiographies that have appeared periodically since his death, Sarkar's life and work have not been rigorously examined, although that may be changing. He makes tantalizing appearances in Pankaj Mishra's recent book on Pan-Asianism.^[3] Manu Goswami has made a more sustained and scholarly study, arguing that colonial internationalisms like Sarkar's should not be trapped within the narrative of national histories that culminate in the establishment of sovereign states.^[4] The problem with Goswami's analysis is that she tends to detach Sarkar's world from its local place of manufacture and utility. The nation-state is not extricable from the internationalism that Sarkar pursued, not least because for Sarkar, internationalism was largely a way of talking about nationhood. The sovereign nation-state, not a radically reordered world, remained the keystone of his postcolonial Utopia.

Sarkar matters not because his scholarship has stood 'the test of time': much of it is highly dated by present-day analytical criteria. That, of course, is where its value lies. Sarkar represents a particular moment in the intellectual history of Indian modernity, when two broad cultural and political projects came together for many – but not all – nationalists. One was the project of opposing, rather than reinforcing, Orientalist narratives of essential difference. The other was the imperative of restoring the nation to the world. India had become disconnected and isolated from Hegel's world-history, they perceived, and imperialism had reinforced that ghettoization with its political order and its order of knowledge.^[5] Their task was to break out of the ghetto, which both reflected and exacerbated the problem of their emasculation. These considerations shaped Sarkar's vision of the kind of state that was most conducive to racial dignity, imbuing it with an obsessive militarism that tended frequently to override other concerns, such as questions of sovereignty, legality and anti-colonialism itself. The pursuit of racial equality through the nation-state was, in other words, not entirely compatible with the pursuit of racial justice, although Sarkar insisted on both.

The fact that Japan was a central object of Sarkar's admiration made these contradictions and complications all the more inescapable. Japan was already a colonial power, and its disregard for Chinese sovereignty was as egregious as that of the Western powers. Such 'equality' sat very uneasily with Sarkar's Sinophilia: no reconciliation could be credible here. Rather than attempt to reconcile Japanese aggressiveness with Chinese passivity, Sarkar generally made a temporal separation: the Chinese predicament represented the humiliating Asian present, while Japan

represented a model of the future. There was, however, considerable ambivalence. Sarkar's vision of justice – or rather, injustice – in the world was inseparable from race, which for him was largely a consciously shared political predicament. While Japan appeared as the Asian champion, the methods of its power and the politics of its self-identification – particularly its tendency to affiliate itself diplomatically with the Western powers – also raised the specter of deracination, from which Sarkar recoiled. China, by contrast, was more pliable: it could be either India's Asian fellow-victim, or a vision of greatness that, while clearly imperial, was neither suspiciously distant from Asia nor tainted by a recognizable colonialism.

Sarkar's primary interest lay in appropriating Asia for his vision of a manly, or 'energistic,' Indian nation. This could be done in two ways. One was to participate vicariously in Japanese imperialism. The other was to extend, as far as possible, a historical and cultural Indian claim upon Japan, not to mention China. Other Indian scholars, like Sarkar's friend and eulogist Radhakumud Mookerjee, had already shown their eagerness to make similar claims upon Southeast Asia.^[6] Consequently, the India that Sarkar envisioned became hard to separate from a certain language of modern politics and history, which might be described as a rhetoric of conquest. This expansionism cannot be brushed away as merely metaphorical; for the Koreans and the Chinese, it was already quite real. The restoration of the masculinity of the colonized, however, was seen as requiring not just a state, but a counter-imperial world order that troubled the very men engaged in imagining it.

The utilization of Japan to construct a state based on militarism and imperial fantasy, a manhood based on violence, and a race based on conquest indicates, first of all, the limits imposed by resentment nationalism on liberal cosmopolitanism.^[7] In Europe and in Germany in particular, such limits constituted an interwar outlook: that of a humiliated nation longing for blood, fire and 'wholeness' even as it experimented with republican institutions and revolutionary ideals.^[8] Similar but not identical considerations saturate Sarkar's Romantic yearning for a state of war. Secondly, it reflects a particular facet of the fascination that Japan – the first modern Asian state, the perpetrator of terrible atrocities, and the victim of unspeakable horror – has held for Indian onlookers in the twentieth century, right up to the more or less simultaneous moments when Japan lay devastated and India emerged from colonial rule. From Rabindranath Tagore to Radhabinod Pal, Japan was an object of great desire and alarm: a sign

of much that was missing from the colonized nation, a theater of revenge, and simultaneously, the representation of the cannibalistic nature of the world in which they moved. They spoke from Indian realities; the Japan they imagined was never very far away. Not surprisingly, the desire to walk in Japanese shoes (with Hindustani hearts) proved unsustainable for nearly all of them.

The State of War

In the early 1920s, Sarkar reviewed a number of new books on Indian nationalist politics. These included Verney Lovett's *A History of the Indian Nationalist Movement*.^[9] Lovett was an ICS man whose political sympathies were clear. He had co-authored the Rowlatt Act, and prepared the official history of Indian sedition for the colonial government in 1918.^[10] He dismissed out of hand the idea of dominion status for India, calling its British advocates naive. India, he explained, could not be kept in the empire without direct British rule, because even the moderate Indian nationalists were closet extremists.^[11] He was not a man Sarkar might be expected to befriend, and Sarkar began his review by noting that Lovett was a straightforward imperialist. He then agreed with Lovett's assessment that there was no real difference between Moderate and Extremist in Indian nationalist politics: you were either a 'patriot' or a 'traitor.' He continued:

'In the background of all this [revolutionary activity] the reader has to visualize a thoroughly disarmed India. And since her patriots have accepted the challenge of the British Empire their methods of work are naturally twofold. In the first place, they try by hook or by crook to equip themselves with arms. Secondly, they seek to improvise ways and means of acquiring a training in military maneuvers. Military discipline is achieved not only in this very process of financing the movement, but also in organized attempts to kill off persons in the British service undesirable to them, as well as their secret agents.

From a reading of the book one rises with the conviction that a state of war exists in India between the people who are its natural leaders, and the foreigners who have managed to get possession of the country. This belligerency, chronic and old as it is, is not recognized as such in international law, because the rebels have not yet been able to smuggle, purchase or steal enough arms and ammunition for one or two dramatic military demonstrations. But India's efforts to attain political emancipation in the teeth of the formidable opposition of the enemy

are patent to all who study warfare and the 'halfway houses' to war. The...book is a record of this struggle, especially of the crisis that is coming to a head, from the other side of the shield.'^[12]

Sarkar thus read Lovett's book with a certain satisfaction. Clearly, there was a convergence between what the imperialist saw, and what the nationalist wanted to see. From his position within a regime looking to justify its repression, Lovett described the nationalist challenge as a radical, unified and effective threat, and implied that it was nothing short of a war against the empire. Sarkar is happy to agree, because the rhetoric of national war strengthens his position that India is not only an extant nation, but nearly an extant state. War not only produced race and nation, it was a prerogative and a sign of statehood. It set political violence and the community that practiced it above the illegitimacy and insignificance of mere terrorism. The lack of wider recognition for this state of war was, therefore, equally irritating to both Lovett and Sarkar, and the latter needed something substantial and undeniable to reify his people.

But where might the 'disarmed' find their militarism, by which Sarkar meant the ability, the will and an undeniable eagerness to make war? Where was the spectacle, without which the rhetoric of war fell flat? For middle-class nationalists, the past was the closest armory and theater. Anticipating Romila Thapar, Sarkar denied that Ashoka's Mauryan state had been pacifist, or that 'the citizens of India' at the time had been bound by Buddhism: *dhamma* was not Buddhism.^[13] And even the Buddha was recovered for militarism and his disciples converted into quasi-Jesuits: 'Shakya wanted his followers to be moral and intellectual gymnasts and move about like fire,' Sarkar declared.^[14] In his extensive writings on early Indian religion, he carefully downplayed whatever was mystical and 'quietist,' highlighting the rational, worldly, activist, organizationally inclined elements, from humanitarian intervention to the killing of tyrant kings.^[15] The nature of the individual and of society had to be rescued from the Orientalist obsession with difference, and reimagined to fit the modern European or American state of the period between Napoleon and the First World War.

Tellingly, Sarkar identified the capacity for organization, movement and war as signs of civilizational virility, and virility as a particular kind of gendered citizenship. '[Kalidasa] was as great a nationalist or patriot or jingo as was the Roman [Virgil],' he declared.^[16] The Gupta era

was ‘an epoch of all-round success in arms and arts,’ and that, for Sarkar, made it ‘the period to conjure with even in the twentieth century.’^[17] The combination of ‘arms and arts’ constituted the heart of his definition of a successful national culture. Literature, to be noteworthy, had to be national and nationalist. The ‘jingo’ state (with its immediate association with the overwrought machismo of Theodore Roosevelt and Kipling), its institutions and mentalities were thus never allowed to drift far from the center of things. Regarding the *Arthashastra*, he wrote:

‘The compiler was Kautilya, a Bismarck or Richelieu of India. The militarism of the Hindus would be evident to every reader of this book. Women with prepared food and beverage were advised to stand behind the fighting lines and utter encouraging words to the men at the front. This is out-Spartaing Sparta. There is here indicated a real ‘universal’ conscription like the one which was more or less witnessed during the recent World-War.’^[18]

The militarist-statist counter-history that Sarkar was constructing for India was thus eclectic and accommodating in its Western references, incorporating Sparta, Richelieu and the Great War in the same paragraph. In ‘Hindu Institutional Life,’ Sarkar again put forward his ‘militarist’ perspective on Indian social organization:

‘It is alleged that the Hindus have ever been defective in organizing ability and the capacity for administering public bodies. Epoch by epoch, however, India has given birth to as many heroes, both men and women, in public service, international commerce, military tactics, and government, as has any race in the Occidental world. Warfare was never monopolized by the so-called Khatriya or warrior caste in India, but as in Europe, gave scope to every class or grade of men to display their ability.’^[19]

Sarkar’s dismissal of the idea that warfare in early India was a Kshatriya preserve is a typical critique of the Orientalist vision of caste, but it is more than that.^[20] It also indicates a view of war as the definitive national activity, which not only includes the entire race/nation, but allows the nation to discover and become itself. Caste is rejected precisely because it goes against modern notions of horizontal citizenship and popular sovereignty. In the process, war becomes a basic democratic phenomenon: an experience of citizenship in which all can participate. This formulation is similar to not only the Israeli mythology of citizenship-through-military-service, but to less obvious national militarisms (like the American) and also the more extreme (like the German and the Japanese). ‘[T]here was nothing against the Bramana [sic] class *as such* being

drafted for the regiments,' Sarkar writes about the Mauryan state. 'The whole nation could be drilled at need.'^[21] Magadh became Prussia.

The eclecticism on display in Sarkar's writing is not random or careless. In each case, Sarkar posited a national romance of militarism. American and German militarisms, perhaps obviously, are not identical, and the former is not straightforwardly Romantic.^[22] Sarkar, however, wanted both models for his Indian project: he was loath to pass over a useful discursive resource on account of the finer points of ideology. In 'The Songs of Young Bengal,' he warmly noted Hemchandra Banerji's odd but enthusiastic poem about America, in which the poet wrote: 'Her *hu-humkar* yells cause the earth to quake / Disembowel she would the globe, as it were / and reshape it fresh at her own sweet will.'^[23] *Hu-humkars* (a war cry associated with Indian epic literature) and world-disembowelings (which presumably referred to the more assertive American foreign policy since the war with Spain^[24]) did not alarm Sarkar in the least. Both the poet and the fan saw these not only as evidence of a healthy shaking-up of European power, but also as energism, which was a valuable cultural development in its own right, and an essential ingredient of modern statehood.

What was this energism? Sarkar himself described it as a quality 'of the organic body, nature of flesh and blood, health-basis of struggles.'^[25] While it conformed to Sarkar's early-twentieth-century fondness for biological models of social behavior, it was also a form of masculine vigor, or the willingness to act in the world: an essentially Nietzschean quality of the powerful Self. It was undeniably a gendered Self. To drop out of history and the 'world' – to be relegated to the 'private' sphere of the home and the domestic shrine – was also to be stripped of manhood. Sarkar was no crude woman-hater: in 'Manu as the Inspirer of Nietzsche,' he (and Nietzsche) managed to temper the notorious misogyny of the ancient Indian 'law-giver' into a more palatable modern patriarchy, depicting Manu's 'code' as being 'gallant' and 'reverent' to women even as it provided a Dionysian alternative to the suffocating femininity of Christianity.^[26] Sarkar quoted Nietzsche from *The Antichrist*: 'All those things which Christianity smothers with its bottomless vulgarity, procreation, woman, marriage, are [in Manu] treated with earnestness, with reverence, with love and confidence.'^[27] Alert as always to exoticizing discourses, he added that Orientalists who came from the cheek-turning culture of Christianity could hardly assign a peculiar passivity to Hindus.^[28] Sarkar's contempt for the 'soft' or unworldly aspect of

Christianity is a direct contrast with Gandhi: both men sought to affiliate themselves with one part of western tradition and to reject another, and both sought to Orientalize the west, but they made diametrically opposed choices because of their different readings of gender and dignity. [29]

As in the thinking of other Romantic nationalists elsewhere in the world, Sarkar's relationship with Nietzsche was a twisted mess. Sarkar conceded that nineteenth-century Indians were 'emasculated and demoralized,' and India 'an asylum of incapables, a land of vegetating animalcules, or of mere stocks and stones.' [30] Salvation through energism was possible, but it was intertwined the rediscovery of the state, particularly since 'Nietzsche finds greater truth in the mercilessly correct view of inter-statal relations given by the Hindus than in the hypocritical statements of Occidental statesmen whose actions belie their words.' [31] Indeed, 'Old India has contributed its hoary Manu as the master-builder in order to boss the super-men who are to architecture the Occident of the twentieth century.' [32] Reinterpreting Manu was not, however, the only relevance of Nietzsche to the discovery of 'Hindu militarism.' Energism and militarism were explicitly connected to the resentment that informed Sarkar's vision of the world of race and power: in what might be considered a tactical misunderstanding, what Nietzsche abhorred became, for Sarkar, something to cultivate. [33]

That deviation from Nietzsche was rooted in Sarkar's conviction that the disease itself could generate the cure. In 'The Psychology of the Semi-Slave,' Sarkar wrote about imperialisms that were vigor-sapping but also productive of rebellion:

'Normally [the ruling race in a colony] has no troubles except what may be created by the disarmed militarism and impotent insurrections of the subject race. But the daily life of people in a 'sphere of influence,' a Morocco, Abyssinia, or China, is a perpetual menace to the peace between the powers. For it is subject to [a] thousand and one restrictions, imposed without law and resented without vigor, all the more serious because of their extent being boundless and significance mysterious. Such spheres are necessarily the eternal storm-centers of the world.' [34]

Moreover, he suggested (citing a cluster of resolutions passed by the American Friends of Freedom for India in 1920), particular colonial institutions – such as the stationing of an ‘unnatural’ body of troops (i.e., men without wives) in India – had generated readily visible forms of gendered demoralization: a plague of venereal disease, homosexuality, and a prostitution in which Indian women were set apart for the use of white men.^[35] The idea that military prostitution threatened the masculinity of native men has not received adequate attention in the scholarship on the Contagious Diseases and Cantonments Acts^[36]; Sarkar’s writing indicates that it was a humiliation that closely fit the connections between nationalism, patriarchal notions of ‘our women,’ and the dynamics of sexual gain in a racial hierarchy.^[37]

Combating this racial and gendered degradation required a compensating spirit, which Sarkar identified not only as nationalism, but also as resentment itself. The Great War had transformed the resentment of the emasculated into something potent, Sarkar perceived, not least because it had opened up new spaces and opportunities for manhood: ‘[T]he war,’ he wrote, ‘has given Asia the one thing she needed – a complete change in the diplomatic grouping of powers and in the values obtaining in the political psychology of all nations.’^[38] The reference to political ‘psychology’ is worth noting. It is, on the one hand, a fashionable deployment of the rhetoric of psycho-science to the study of groupings like ‘race’ or ‘nation.’ On the other hand, it refers to operationalized ideology in imperial relations: the racism of imperial powers, and the inclination of the colonized to resist (rhetorically, politically, militarily) the assumptions of automatic privilege or deference that they had been taught. War, resentment and the need for revenge, in that useful twist on Nietzsche, become the stuff of vigor: to be prized, not avoided, in the colonies. In the modern world of empires, resentment becomes the only alternative to slavery and hegemony.

That, of course, is a rather Fanonian formulation of the purifying and constructive power of violence, which presumes that violence does not so much derive from an extant position of strength, as generate strength.^[39] Sarkar’s efforts to systematize the idea are visible in his use of the word ‘vindictiveness.’ Railing against Orientalist characterizations of China and the Chinese as docile, he writes:

‘To treat the Chinese as a pacifist race is the greatest...practical joke...in historical literature. The truth is the exact opposite. If the Chinese have not been an aggressive people, one would have to define afresh as to what aggressiveness means. The people and the rulers of China have exhibited warlike and *vindictive*[emphasis mine] habits in every generation. Even the Buddhist monks used to form themselves into military bands whenever the need arose. The martial characteristics of [the] Chinese have really been as conspicuous as those of the proverbial fighting races of India.

A race, whose collective consciousness is persistent enough to demand and achieve a continuous overflowing and cumulative enlargement, is certainly not a conservative stay-at-home, and war-dreading people.’[40]

Sarkar’s use of words like ‘militarism’ and ‘vindictive’ is not a casual imprecision with language; nor should it be taken as the deployment of quaint jargon with no meaning beyond the text. An ideological project is embedded in his rhetoric: in the process of rejecting essential difference and Orientalist clichés about the feminized East, Sarkar enters into a moral inversion in which aggression and vindictiveness become good. This is part of a disquieting connection between fascism and anti-colonialism: the need to reject colonial discourses of subjugation and weakness produces an infatuation not just with the strong state and hypermasculine culture, but also with illiberal political structures and impulses. The insistence on a violent Orient is part of Sarkar’s attempt to restore Asia to world-history by restoring history – imagined as the stuff of statecraft and expansionism – to Asia.

The inversion, however, is never fully credible even to its own articulators. A note of hysteria creeps easily into Sarkar’s rhetoric of ‘vindictive’ China, for instance, and into his declaration that ancient Indian *rishis* were skilled at ‘burning, killing and fighting.’ (His embarrassed biographer Haridas Mukherjee explained that such language should not be taken literally, but merely as a sign of Sarkar’s ‘human manner.’[41]) Also, the counter-discourse that Sarkar puts forward never fully cuts the tie with Orientalism: it falls back on the Martial Races theory.[42] The idea of an aggressive Japan is no less attached (or attachable) to Orientalist/racist discourse than is the idea of a docile China,[43] an unworldly India, or as Sarkar himself admits in his

discussions of American racism, the 'Yellow Peril.' Consequently, Sarkar puts himself in a position where he must both deny and assert the reality of the Yellow Peril:

'[T]he persecution to which innocent Orientals have been exposed in America...evidences that America and Europe are birds of a feather so far as aggression is concerned. In Young Asia's political psychology, therefore, the *ultimatum* of American Labor to the Orient for the 'crime of color' affords the same stimulus to vindictive will and intelligence as does the steady annihilation of enslaved and semi-subject races by dominant European Powers and the notorious postulate of the 'white man's burden' that pervades the intellectuals, journalists, university circles and 'upper ten thousands' of Eur-America.'

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Cracks then begin to appear in the rhetoric of vindictiveness and in the culture of the state of war, with Sarkar revealing the ambivalence of his desire:

'Reprisals and retaliations are undoubtedly justifiable weapons in literary as in material warfare. It is out of vindictiveness that people have resort to them. And surely Asia today is pervaded by the spirit of revenge; for the mal-treatment that she has received at Eur-America's hands is profound and extensive, really 'too deep for tears.' But no system of values can look for permanence on a war-basis. War is a force in social economy only because it raises issues and clarifies the surcharged atmosphere. Life's dynamics however must proceed to erect new structures on the new foundations created by the change in status quo.'

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Elsewhere, he acknowledges that vindictive militarism is an unfortunate and temporary necessity brought about by the politics of race and empire, and even suggests that vindictiveness is itself a form of impotence:

‘[T]hrough the impact of the war, an intense wave of militarism has enveloped all ranks of the Asian and African peoples from Manila to Morocco. The vindictive nationalism of the last two decades has been lifted up to the spiritual plane in Asia’s consciousness.’^[46]

Sarkar thus speaks in the same breath of the onset of militarism, the decline of ‘vindictive’ nationalism, and a new ‘uplift’ to a ‘spiritual plane’: militarism, in this counter-formulation, is linked to spirituality and held up as the *opposite* of vindictiveness.

The tension was not so much resolved as extended through two simultaneous narratives of war. In one, Sarkar made vengeful threats. In the other, he adopted a rhetoric of conquest that was not so much vengeful as natural. European imperialism in the world and American racism at home would force Asians to strike back, he warned:

‘[T]hrough all the ages territorial expansion, dynastic prestige, commercial monopoly, military renown of *digvijaya* [world conquest], and so forth, have dictated the call to arms. Now that there remains no more of land, water, and air to be seized except possibly on Mars, the peace of the world is being recklessly staked by the aggressive races on the colour of the skin. It is in this way that the organic struggle for self-assertion maintains its continuity by changing its camouflage and ostensible motive from generation to generation, and that might establishes its historic right to rule mankind. Young Asia is fully conscious of the situation and has been preparing itself to contribute to the grand cosmic evolution from its own angle of vision.

For the present, Asia’s retaliation may easily take the form of an economic boycott of the United States. It is unfortunate that Americans should have lost the moral hold on the Orient when can least afford to do without it. Is it expedient for America to have a discontented Asia to reckon with *now*, in view of the fact that the possibilities of the Orient as a playing field for American enterprise cannot be overlooked even by those to whom Latin America is looming large? A monumental world-problem is hanging on the capacity of the American brain to rise to the height of the occasion and bring about a fair adjustment between the claims of Young Asia and

the right of the United States legislature, from the platform of interracial justice and goodwill.’[47]

Sarkar links anti-Asian racism in America to the phenomenon of racial death, or rather, survival, in the colonized world: Asians will refuse to die like the savages of the world, and the West must come to terms with their natural determination to survive, which is itself inseparable from action and expansion. It is not a simple cause-and-effect link between Asian tenacity and Western racism. Rather, the two are pieces of the larger problem of race/empire, which will generate a backlash – in the form of economic boycotts and, implicitly, race-war – with which the West will eventually have to contend. He cited Ludwig Gumplowicz’s theory of *Rassenkampf*, or ‘race struggle,’ both as a critique of Western racism and as a defense of the Asian urge to conquer.[48] In ‘A Call to Cosmopolitanism,’ Sarkar wrote: ‘Young Asia wants Eur-America to remember the historical fact that the duration and extent of oriental aggressions into Europe have been greater than those of [the] European into Asia.’[49] It would be difficult to find a better example of the contorted nature of the cosmopolitanism of resentment. Having articulated a reasonably consistent position of justice premised on equality, Sarkar slips into a self-defeating rhetoric of threats, taunts and muscular nationalism: ‘remember, we humiliated you more than you humiliated us.’

The equality (if not surplus) of historical humiliation was necessary, because a very large part of Sarkar’s polemic is a plea for Orientals to be recognized – and treated – as humans and kinfolk of Europeans. If there is something pathetic about this, it is a colonial predicament: a residue of the very mendicancy that Sarkar decried in Moderate politicians, that cannot be fully disguised by the ink expended on ‘conquest and expansion.’ With military conquests unavailable or restricted to Japanese adventures, Sarkar had to focus mainly on metaphors of conquest and expansion. Writing of the science of ‘Young India,’ he insisted that ‘Jagadish Chunder Bose’s comprehensive analysis of the ‘responses’... is but the theoretic correlate of the modern Indian *sadhana* (strivings) for conquest and expansion.’[50] Europe was already India’s ‘sadhana’ in the colonial era, of course: it certainly was Sarkar’s. But that *sadhana* – which was perilously close to mimicry – could be imbued with dignity if it was recast in terms of *digvijaya*, i.e., injected with militarism, vindictiveness and ‘spirit,’ which meant national spirit and not some metaphysical irrelevancy.

Asian conquests could thus be differentiated politically from European conquests, but only very tenuously. Both were natural, after all, except that one was also legitimized and energized by justice. Since nationhood in this perspective came with the choice of ‘conquer or be conquered,’ there was, potentially, the Japanese option: joining the colonizers in their project of racist imperialism. After the Great War and the creation of the League of Nations, Ramsay MacDonald had proposed that at least some of the European colonies in Africa be made over to India under the League’s provision for ‘mandates.’ MacDonald wrote that either the plan would fail and be reversed with no harm done, or it would ‘stamp India with a dignity which would command for it a position of unquestioned equality amongst the federated nations of the Empire.’^[51] Sarkar scoffed at the idea, not out of solidarity with Africans, but because he believed that Indians had already done their bit for British imperial ventures.^[52]

For a man who wanted India to be counted as an actor in the world, MacDonald’s proposal could not have been entirely without appeal. Sarkar himself had declared (in a review of Vincent Smith’s *Oxford History of India*) that international relations were normatively, not pathologically, a matter of *matsyanyaya*: the ancient Indian ‘law of the fish’ (i.e., the axiom that big fish eat little fish).^[53] There can be no doubt about which side of the fish-law he wanted to be on. But Sarkar recoiled from the condescension implicit in MacDonald’s idea, and from the language of the ‘experiment,’ which cast the colony in the role of a specimen even as it gave it the trappings of power and prestige. Moreover, the plan involved the League of Nations, for which Sarkar had nothing but contempt: he saw it both as a European imperialist front and as an infringement of the principle of sovereignty. His rhetoric of Asian decolonization, after all, was premised on an unequivocal declaration that ‘The expulsion of the West from the East is the sole preliminary to a discussion of fundamental peace terms.’^[54] Within this militancy, or rather militarism, the League could only be a Western-capitalist plot. Conquest and expansion were worthwhile only if initiated by Asians themselves, in their own interests.

Sarkar’s anti-imperialism was seriously complicated by his reliance on that rhetoric of conquest, manifest not only in the state of war based on *matsyanyaya*, but also in a citizenship based on *Rassenkampf*. His determination to see the Crusades as an Asian aggression against Europe (or

a European defence against Asian aggression) is fully aligned with his tendency to identify with the aggressor over the victim. It is not that he was unaware of a moral problem, but that the colonized man's need for power outweighed or inverted moral considerations. 'Internationalism' became inseparable from aggressive acquisition: when Sarkar describes Ashoka as an 'internationalist,' he means 'imperialist.' ('He brought the whole of Western Asia, Egypt, Greece and Macedon within the sphere of Hindu culture.'^[55]) This reflects the contorted construction of cosmopolitanism by nationalists: engagement across borders veered easily into fantasies of domination and hegemony.

The Japanese Conundrum

For an ideologue who saw 1905 as the great turning point in the history of the modern world, Japan was irresistible in more ways than one. Its naval victory over Russia that year was literally spectacular: people looked on, especially in the colonies, and they readily made connections between their own struggles and the battles of Port Arthur and the Tsushima Straits, between their own racial-political predicament and that of the Japanese.^[56] Japan was the resurgent Asian Self, waiting to be owned by the emasculated. It was not, however, an easy claim to stake. The Japanese themselves appeared ambivalent towards their admirers, and the admirers proved to be fickle.

For Sarkar, Japan and Japanese were admirable not only because they had defeated Europeans in war, but also because they had shown themselves to be masters of their own cultural fate, having bypassed crucial philological roadblocks on the way to modernity and world-history. 'Japan did not wait for the revolution of scientific terms in the Japanese language before she proceeded to assimilate the standard European and American works on medicine, engineering, and metallurgy,' he wrote.^[57] Having pursued precisely this type of cultural development himself in his work on 'national education' since the Swadeshi years in Bengal,^[58] Sarkar pointed out the relevance of the maneuver to Indian modernizers and institution-builders:

‘The paucity of technical terms in the [Indian] vernaculars is only an excuse of [imperial] ‘politicians’ who have no other weapon with which to combat Young India’s theory of knowledge except sheer obstinacy and the Satanic will to retard human progress by any and every means. [N]o philologist has yet ventured to assert the capabilities of the Japanese language as an instrument of modern expression are richer than those of any of the Dravidian or the Aryan languages of India.’[59]

As in linguistics, so in science: Japan had actively pursued modern technological knowledge since the Meiji restoration without waiting for a colonial spoon-feeding. Such bypassing was not merely academic. It was closely related to the state of war that Sarkar imagined. As an ‘active’ form of learning, it was the opposite of passivity: it required improvising continuously in one’s own national interest, rather than waiting for knowledge to be invented and handed down by others. Moreover, although Sarkar emphasized working outside the apparatus of the colonial state in India, his vision of decolonization retained a major role for state or quasi-state intervention in the form of bureaucracies of language and education, and emphasized the need to create and control the institutions of national governance. Japan after 1905 demonstrated that when European knowledge was acquired by Asians through such self-motivated tactics, it ceased to be European. The state of war was thus already, and definitively, free.

Whether that freedom belonged to Japan alone, or to other colonized people as well, remained unclear. Commenting on Russian strategic and political prospects in Asia after 1905, Sarkar wrote:

‘Having eliminated France from the Asian game or rather having localized French ambitions within fixed areas the British proceeded to strengthen the new friendship of Japan on the morrow of her victory [in 1905]. For Japan was the strongest of the powers likely to compete with her in China and the Chinese waters. Besides, Japan might eventually become the rallying-

ground of rebels and political refugees from India and Burma. The British overtures could not but be welcomed by the Japanese themselves as the line of least resistance was the only advisable course for Japan. She needed, furthermore, the backing of a first class European power. She agreed, therefore, to help England put down revolutions among the Hindus and Moslems of the British Empire, and glibly proclaimed the policy of the open door in the Far East.’[60]

Evidently, for enthusiasts of Asian decolonization, the Japanese were not an entirely reliable asset. But because they mattered as a strategic calculation to the Russians and the British, they also mattered to the political position that Sarkar was engaged in assembling, which had to do with restoring a broken model of the world at least as much as it had to do with justice. The establishment of links between Asian and European affairs was a vital part of Sarkar’s strategy of returning a political margin to its rightful place in world-history. This remained operative when agency in diplomatic affairs continued to reside primarily with Europe. Even when it was less than impressive, a militarized Japan ensured that Asia was not relegated to total passivity in its own history. The Japanese may act against the interests of their fellow-Asians, but they *acted*, and they did so on the world stage. That was ideologically valuable.

Moreover, in spite what the Japanese government may have promised its British ally, the hope remained that Japan would function at least occasionally as a voice for racial justice in the world, as it had done at the Paris peace talks after the Great War.[61] Japanese diplomats had, of course, spoken in their own national interests at the Versailles. Nevertheless, the rhetoric was of racial equality, and Sarkar extended it into a larger context of Asian subjugation:

‘The only protests can come from Japan in regard to Eastern Asia, if at all. But they are bound to be too feeble. Little Nippon is dazed by the extraordinary changes that have taken place. Even her own independence may be in danger. She cannot any longer look for self-defence in the mutual competition among the Great Powers, for virtually there are no Great Powers left. The complete annihilation of German influence in the Pacific and the Far East is certainly not an unmixed blessing to the Japanese people or to the Asians as a whole.’[62]

Japan thus remained the Great Colored Hope, and the very tenuousness of that hope – Japan’s ‘dazed’ condition – provided a point of identification for other Asians struggling to come to terms with modernization and weakness. Sarkar continued, for instance, to seek a balance between his empathy for China, the Asian victim that was potentially a great power, and his admiration for Japan, the Asian victimizer that was already a major power but otherwise a victim, bullied by the West since Perry’s arrival in Tokyo Bay in 1853. ‘Altogether...Japan has been ‘more sinned against than sinning’ in her Chinese policy,’ he observed, ‘but of course, so far as the infringement of China’s sovereignty and territorial rights...is concerned, it is useless to weigh the powers in the balance and find which is the greater sinner.’[63] The defensiveness reflected not just an outlook on the world of race and international power politics, but a tension within the colonized nationalist, who can (and has to) identify with the victim even as he wants to be on the side of the powerful and the victorious. The appeal of Japan was precisely that Japan was both a winner and a loser.

Sarkar’s ambivalence about just what (and who) modern Japan represented gives away his uneasy conscience over what it meant to be a winner (or to use his own rhetoric, to be both ‘vindictive’ and effective) in the world. His reaction is related, in that sense, to Rabindranath Tagore’s critique of Japanese imperialism.[64] Sarkar’s narrative, however, was much more of an apologia than Rabindranath’s, because he accepted the imperatives of competing races and nation-states. It was thus more internally conflicted. The Yellow Peril became the ‘white peril’ in Sarkar’s disturbed rhetoric, explaining and partially excusing Japanese behavior:

‘The elementary need of self-preservation thus happens to induce Japan to resist by all means any further advance of Eur-America penetration in the Orient. The nightmare of this ‘white peril’ is the fundamental fact of Japanese politics, internal as well as international. Japan can hardly be blamed for trying to snatch a few pieces of the Far Eastern loot for an Asian people.’[65]

Like other apologists for Japan, Sarkar implied that for Koreans and the Chinese, the loss of sovereignty to other Asians was less damaging – and historically less meaningful – than the

aggression of Europeans.^[66] At the same time, Japanese policy remains a form of looting: Sarkar cannot bring himself to embrace Japan.

Even Sarkar's interpretation of the Russo-Japanese War betrays his ambivalence. On the one hand, he proclaimed its significance as a real shift in race/power, but on the other, he denied that it constituted a new pattern. In 'The Event of 1905,' he wrote:

Even the success of Japan was due to the fact that Russia was not actively assisted by her Christian brethren against the non-white pagan. The last war has also shown that the grouping of belligerents by colour, race or religion is yet as far from being a question of practical politics as it ever was in history. The problem of each Asian people will then have to be fought out separately against its own official enemies with the support of such Powers, Oriental and Occidental, as may for the time being be interested in its fortunes.^[67]

Sarkar thus remained reluctant to declare that the Russo-Japanese War was the start of a reliable Asian political resurgence. It was, and it was not. In the sense that he and other Asian cosmopolitans were excited by the spectacular demolition of the white monopoly on modernity, it was meaningful. But Sarkar also knew that the circle of cosmopolitans was small and not especially effectual; in the realm of statecraft and policy-making, racial purpose and solidarity remained elusive. In other words, whereas the ideological and polemical significance of the rise of Japan was great, the political significance might not be.

In a similar vein, the Japanese victory was both miraculous and mundane, and Sarkar was by no means certain which is more desirable. The victory was politically miraculous. It is at the level of the miracle that Japan's emergence as a modern Asian nation and a world power was fragile, unreliable, suffused by pessimism. But as a sociological and racial phenomenon, it was mundane, because the mundane is also the level where the mumbo-jumbo of racial difference fell apart and produced a reliable basis for dignity:

‘[T]he Asian civilization with which Japan started on the race about 1870 was not essentially distinct from the Eur-American, but...it was slightly poorer and ‘inferior’... because it had not independently produced the steam engine. Thus, scientifically speaking, there is nothing miraculous in the phenomenal developments of new Japan.’[68]

That split between the miraculous and the mundane informed Sarkar’s attitude towards Japan as a racial entity that is Asian but not necessarily *of* or *with* Asia. It generated, for instance, a sharp resentment towards Japanese racial attitudes: specifically, the perceived Japanese tendency to leave Asia behind for the company of Europe. A miraculous Japan was an attractive image for colonized Asians because it carried the possibility of transcending the crippling handicaps of race, but it also allowed the Japanese elites to assume that they – unlike other Asians – had already transcended race and taken on a different political destiny.

The more powerful and ‘miraculous’ Japan became, therefore, the harder it became for the colonized to identify with it. The difficulty was ubiquitous among Indian admirers of the Japanese miracle, although the reasons varied considerably. Rabindranath, as is well known, became increasingly critical of what he saw as the Japanese determination to replicate the worst aspects of European civilization.[69] In the 1920s and 1930s, writers of Bengali children’s literature praised (and envied) the modernity of Japan’s cities but simultaneously resorted to Orientalist exoticization, and concluded that the Japanese were simply unnatural: unsmiling automatons, or flowers without fragrance, as Ashoka Mullick wrote in ‘Japan and the Japanese.’[70] (It was a rather different deployment of nature from Sarkar’s reading of Gumplowicz.)

Sarkar’s own reaction was to argue that the Japanese had become partially deracinated by their success in the world. He wrote:

‘Since 1905 Japan herself has indeed been anxious to proclaim to the world that she is different from, and superior to, the rest of Asia in her ideals, institutions, and methods. But this notion is confined within the circle of a few diplomats, professors who virtually hold diplomatic posts, and such journalists as have touch with prominent members of Parliament. It is, in fact, preached in foreign languages by a section of those intellectuals who have to come across, or make it a point to write for, Eur-American statesmen, scholars, and tourists. The masses of the Japanese, and these diplomats themselves at home are always conscious of the real truth.’[71]

The real truth – the racial-political predicament – was thus both strength and weakness, with the latter predominating. This ambiguity inevitably reminded an Indian nationalist of a familiar weakness:

‘[Japan] must varnish her yellow self white in order that she may be granted the dignity of a ruling race. The Japanese bankers and officials, captains and policemen are therefore compelled to have the Eur-American paraphernalia of public life. This is abhorred by most of them in their heart of hearts. But they must swallow it because this is the price of their recognition as the only ‘civilized’ state of Asia.’[72]

Intriguingly, the complexity of fitting Japan into his map of resurgent Asia compelled Sarkar to reverse his general tendency to distinguish between the ignorant masses and the intelligent vanguard, and fall back into a more conventional concept of national authenticity: the masses were wise, and the elites foolish or hypocritical. In an instability within Sarkar’s narrative of the modern, manly state of ‘Young Asia,’ the Japanese masses become the repository of a racial knowledge that the elite have forfeited. There are then two kinds of deracination: a bad/weak one which is politically aligned with colonialism and imperialism, and a good one (‘Young Asia’), which is nationalist-cosmopolitan but also flawed, in the sense that it lapses easily into the former category. The former is explicitly associated with power and insider-status, but the latter – while marginalized by the existing racial order – is tainted and embarrassed by the nakedness of its desires. Modern Japan is necessarily a fantasy of the militant Indian nationalist, but it is not necessarily a flattering one.

Sarkar's critique of his Japanese counterparts quickly becomes a critique of mimicry, sycophancy and self-hate that Bankim would have appreciated.[73] It comes also with the old nationalist dilemma of how to be similar while also being dissimilar: Asians must have states, states must have railroads and battleships, but precisely for those reasons, perhaps their citizens should wear kimonos or dhotis. 'Japan has learnt by bitter experience that the white nations would not admit her into their caste of first class powers if she were to appear to them in 'native' *kimono* and *geta*,' Sarkar remarks in an essay on 1905.[74] He is not really interested in what the Japanese wear, of course. Clothes stand for political affiliation, and deracination – for him as for other Indian elites wrestling with colonial culture – is mainly a matter of disloyalty to the victims of racism.[75] Clothes stand also for an awareness of colonial power relations, i.e., for the consciousness of humiliation.

What Sarkar was implying, like Bankim in *Kamalakanta*, is that national consciousness in a colonial world is false unless it comes accompanied by that paradoxical sense of shame,[76] and by the desire to assert a contrarian pride and to take the side of other humiliated people. Race becomes the boundary of the humiliated community. The perception that the Japanese had turned their back on the humiliation of the colonized – i.e., on the racial politics of Asian identity – is also why Sarkar identified much more strongly with China than he did with Japan. China remains a civilization even when it is politically 'fallen,' and Japan never quite escapes the suspicion that it is a well-armed barbarian, located geographically, politically and even culturally on the fringes of Asia. Sarkar read the condition of modern Japan – not accepted by the West, and self-distanced from Asia – as an insularity, which, for him, was a particularly unfortunate predicament for a nation. To be insular was the condition of the savage, the backward, and the literally unworldly: the opposite of his cosmopolitan-nationalist-masculine vision of civilization. [77] It was, in fact, a double isolation, because the Japanese state was apparently cut off not only from the world but also from its own society, which remained Asian. These layered isolations constituted a kind of sickness, which could be described and even treated with the language of modern medicine:

'Japan must also have the logic and psychology of the whites with regard to the rest of Asia. The present Japanese view about Chinese and Hindu civilizations, so far as it is jingoistic, is merely

an aspect of this compulsory Occidentalization. Unless this claim of separateness from the Asians is strongly put forward, the Occident would hesitate to treat Japan as a peer. [Young Asia]...does not condemn Japan, but rather pities her isolated condition. The establishment of another Japan on continental Asia is the only possible therapeutic for the current international pathology. And to this the political doctors of Young Asia are addressing themselves.’[78]

The call for ‘another Japan on continental Asia’ may appear alarmingly similar to the rhetoric of Japanese imperialism, but the resemblance is superficial. [79] It is actually the opposite: Sarkar wants a Japan that is self-identified with the political aspirations of the Asian mainland. The notion surfaces in another essay, in which Sarkar wrote:

‘Every inch of Asian soil has to be placed under a sovereign state of the Asian race, no matter whether sovietic-communal, republican, monarchical, democratic or autocratic. For the present there is the urgent call for at least another Japan of fifty, sixty, or seventy million people on continental Asia, able to work its own mines, finance its own administration, and man its own polytechnic colleges.’[80]

Here also, the desire for ‘at least another Japan’ gives away Sarkar’s inability to come to terms with Japan as it existed. As an icon of modern, industrialized Asian statehood, Japan is too valuable to eschew from the fantasy of freedom, and he wants more. But by declaring that he wants a *continental* Japan, he implies that he wants a Japan that is integral – politically, geographically and culturally – to Asia. The specification of a population for this imaginary country returns us to Sarkar’s obsession with militarism: like a military planner, he has calculated what numbers and institutions are required to overturn an existing imbalance of power in the world. Such planning was a common form of fantasy for middle-class Indian youth in this period, when the state was in the hands of other men. A young Nirad Chaudhuri, planning a free Indian military right down to the caliber and loading-mechanism of the guns, but straying down to the harbor to ogle British warships, is another example of this armchair citizenship of the colonized male.[81] Imagining virility had to be a matter of precision: a global chess game, or a war game.

Indian Men and Japanese Ships

Indian aspirations remained at the heart of the game: Japan and China mattered to Sarkar primarily because he could ‘go there’ in the past as well as in the present. (He had visited both countries in 1915-16.) He made frequent, explicit equations between Bushido (which might loosely be described as the culture of the Japanese warrior^[82]) and ‘Kshatriya culture in India.’ He referred, for instance, to ‘the general Bushido morality of the Hindus,’ and in ‘Hindu Materialism,’ declared:

‘Take militarism. Hindustan started the cult of Kshatriyaism, which in Japan is called *Bushido*. The first Hindu Napoleon, Chandragupta Maurya had a regular standing army of 600,000 infantry, 30,000 cavalry, 9000 elephants, and a multitude of chariots. A race which can organize such a vast fighting machine and wield it for offensive and defensive purposes is certainly not over-religious or unpractical or other-worldly.’^[83]

Sarkar backed up the assertion with references to Sanskrit and Puranic texts (not to mention Megasthenes), but he was engaged in mobilizing, for *modern* India, *modern* rather than early Japan. He was also engaged in rejecting the peculiarity of caste and the sealed boundaries of race and culture, so that what was evidently Japanese or Indian *could* be appropriated or exported convincingly, and Kshatriyas and Mauryan infantrymen *could* sail on Japanese battleships. As an intellectual maneuver, it extended his rejection of Orientalist narratives of cultural difference: far from diluting Indian nationhood, Sarkar’s insistence on similarity produced a set of openings through which the nation could enter the world.

The attempt to appropriate Japanese militarism was not without its contradictions, because when Sarkar wanted to emphasize the democratic nature of early India, he typically downplayed the institutional significance of the Kshatriya (and caste in general) in favor of the narrative of the citizen-soldier. Nevertheless, the need to identify with an extant Asian state of war and

assert a continuous culture of Asian militarism took precedence over democracy and justice, in a compromise that colors – and compromises – Sarkar’s vision of a post-colonial world.

The Bushido-Kshatriya equations, after all, were not a theory of coincidence, or of an Asian essence. They were an Indian claim upon Japan, and as such, a narrative of what Sarkar – taking his cue from the historian Radhakumud Mookerjee, who he had known since their days at Calcutta University’s Eden Hindu Hostel – called ‘Greater India.’^[84] The connections between this old nationalist fantasy and Sarkar’s vision of the decolonized world have evaded those who have focused on his ‘Pan-Asian’ or ‘internationalist’ convictions. It was in an essay titled ‘Greater India’ that Sarkar insisted, ‘Hindu thought is even now governing the Bushido morality of the Japanese soldiers.’^[85] Not even China was safe from the ink-stained fingers of the soldiers of Greater India:

‘The Kushans were Scythians or Tartars of Central Asia naturalized on Indian soil. Through them the northern frontiers of India were extended almost as far as Siberia. Along with this territorial expansion, Hindu missionizing activity was greatly enlarged owing to direct political sovereignty or spheres of influence. Central Asia was dotted over with Hindu temples, monasteries, hospitals, schools, museums and libraries. It was through this ‘Greater India’ on the land side that China, the land of Confucius and Laotze, came within the sphere of influence of Hindu culture.’^[86]

Perhaps obviously, Greater India (which was almost unbounded – it extended from Siberia to Madagascar to the Philippines) was simultaneously cosmopolitan, nationalist and colonialist. It reflected an irresistible desire to be in and of the world, but it was not premised on reciprocity, and its vision of the past not only served the political community of the present, it also extended the boundaries of that community into the past. It appealed to Sarkar not only because it took Indians out into the world under their own agency, but also because it brought home to India what was most competitive and ‘energistic’ in ‘Asian culture,’ feeding both his determination to (re)claim the world as India’s oyster, and the militarism that permeated his vision of freedom.

Greater India was not antithetical to historiographical acts of generosity: greatness could be shared. China could be endowed with a historical empire, 'Greater China,' which included Tibet, Sikkim, Burma and Vietnam, and that empire could be legitimized in a way that would have horrified Burmese or Vietnamese nationalists. Siberia, Burma, Indochina and quite a few other places are made over promiscuously to both China and India in Sarkar's writing.[87] That an Indian nationalist would so willingly concede Burma, Sikkim and Tibet to China indicates a temporal and historical distance from freedom: Indian independence and its foreign policy considerations were so remote from Sarkar's thinking in the 1920s that he *could* make these sweeping gestures towards China, which already had some sort of sovereign existence. It can also be regarded as rhetorical overkill. Mainly, however, it suggests a fondness for grand narratives of civilization, nationhood and spheres of influence that steamroller the littler narratives of resistance and peoplehood. Little narratives did not matter very much: they had no use when they could not be incorporated into big countries. What mattered was that Chinese 'imperialism' in the past, like Japan's in the present, was a pre-packaged state, a culture and an ideology of militarism that could signify a past – and implicitly, a present – in which to be an Indian nationalist was also to be a cosmopolitan. In this state and world of the past, present-day Indian men could walk in a particular mode, which might be described as the familiar 'Vivekananda posture.' (Rabindranath spelled out the posture in his 1901 story *Nashta Nir*, in which the nationalist Bhupati imagines his cousin Amal striding along the Embankment in London: 'Erect, head high, Young Bengal!'[88])

Moreover, for a colonized elite that had already made a virtue out of the need to learn from the world, an important principle of pedagogical power was at stake in these formulations of the past. In a time when Indian (and Chinese) students, intellectuals and revolutionaries frequently traveled to Japan to *learn*, and Japanese intellectuals like Kakuzo Okakura came to India to *teach*, Sarkar reversed the direction of tutelage by imagining a past in which Japan and China were the pupils and India the teacher: 'ever since the very dawn of their civilization, the constitution, social hierarchy, poetry, architecture, painting, divinities, and even folklore and the superstitions of Japan have been either Chinese or Hindu.'[89] In 'The Cycles of Cathay,' he wrote:

‘The most active period of the ‘holy alliance’ between India and China was between the fifth and seventh centuries. The Chinese received not only the religion and metaphysics of the Hindus, but also medicine, arithmetic, dramaturgy, folk-festivals, and musical instruments. The greatest epoch of Chinese civilization is the age of the mighty Tangs and brilliant Sung. It was an era of Renaissance in poetry, painting, philosophy, pottery, and what not. This was a direct product of Hindu influences.’[90]

Chinese vindictiveness of the past and Japanese militarism of the present could be made to stand on Indian foundations. *Matsyanyaya* or the law of the fish, Sarkar reminds us in an essay on China, is a ‘Hindu political philosophy’: Asian militarism was an Indian invention.[91] The ideological pay-off is not hard to discern: while Japan could not be disowned in spite of its suspect racial politics, it could in fact be owned by reaching back in time and culture.

To be fair to Sarkar, it should be noted that he was writing well before the Japanese military acquired its particular notoriety: the atrocities of Manchuria and Nanjing were still in the future, unimagined (by him, at any rate).[92] He was groping for a particular form of cultural contact: one that was not attached to racism and expropriation, and not entirely closed to the two-way traffic of knowledge. But in its language, this contact slipped frequently into the terrain of ‘hegemony’ and ‘colonies,’ racism crept into the assumptions of unequal cultural borrowing, mimicry and inauthenticity, and it did not rule out violence and coercion, because that colonial model of ‘international’ contact retained a fierce hold on a man in Sarkar’s historical position:

‘Hindu activity in China was promoted by sea also through Indian navigators, colonizers, and merchant marine. This maritime enterprise gave to India the cultural hegemony ultimately over Burma, Java, Siam, Annam, and Japan.’[93]

The references to maritime activity are not throwaway lines in the work of a scholar excited by the Russo-Japanese War. As an Indian nationalist, Sarkar would of course have been aware of the importance of sea power in the history of the British colonial conquest. He, like many other Indian intellectuals (Radhakumud Mookerjee being the most prominent), would have ‘felt’ the

lack of a navy as a major part of the nation's historical weakness, and regarded navies of the past – Chola armadas, Maratha 'admirals,' and so on – as evidence of historic dignity.[94] I want to suggest that warships of the past and present mattered because they represented movement itself: being able to leave a landlocked inferiority and travel, armed and erect, across a blue liquid curvature that had been colonized by white men as much as any land. This too was a transgression of empire, which was predicated on unequal movement. Only some races could travel at will: then as now, all passports are not equal, and visas are not granted on an equal-opportunity basis.

Sarkar – a boy from the provincial boondocks of Malda who had gone on to lecture in Germany and America – had, of course, done a great deal of traveling himself, but such exceptional and vulnerable mobility only reinforces the awareness of inequality, produces a sense of statelessness and generates an insatiable appetite for more movement. Vivekananda is an obvious case in point, but I think the observation can be made for other colonial elites who went, or wanted to go, abroad. When Rabindranath flew to Iran and Iraq in the 1930s, for instance, he was highly conscious of the connection between his borrowed (KLM) wings, the masculine physicality and vigor of the (Dutch) pilots, his own status as a brown man and a colonial subject, and his kinship with the victims of British aircraft then engaged in bombing the inhabitants of the region.[95]

Only some races have ships of their own – warships in particular. In his thinking about Japan, and even in his remarks on the rise of American power, Sarkar made the connection between the modern technology of mobile warfare, racial self-assertion, and only secondarily, justice. Even with the rise of Asia, white Americans would not meet the fate of the Aztecs and Incas because they were 'militarized and navalized to the *n*th term,' he remarked.[96] He understood that the power of modern weaponry was also the power to articulate racial privilege, or to articulate race itself. But he refused to disavow those privileges. His remarks on America retained a suggestion that the Native Americans (even more than the Burmese) did not count because they had not turned the *fact* of their race into a *political position* of race, backed up with ships. They were landlocked, self-isolated from the world, and therefore naturally fated to die. Thus, although Sarkar was concerned with justice, the concern was limited by his investment in modernity and civilization. Only the modern/civilized of the world – including 'Young Asia' – were fully

deserving of justice; only those men who could think in terms of world war were fully deserving of 'world peace'. For others, calculations applied that were not far removed from Gobineau and Darwin.

The Other Side of the Coin

In 1946, Michio Takeyama, a Japanese veteran of the war that had just ended, wrote a short novel titled *Harp of Burma*. It was ostensibly what we today call 'young adult' literature, i.e., a book written for teenagers. Below the surface, however, *Harp of Burma* was entirely more 'serious,' rooted in the experience of traumatized veterans and a devastated society in ways that go far beyond the military camaraderie and sanitized violence of war stories for adolescents. John Dower has noted that Takeyama's novel is an early sign of the Japanese attempt to come to terms with defeat and occupation.^[97] It is also an attempt to come to terms with the state of war itself: a tentative questioning of the model of modernity and citizenship that Japan had embraced since the later nineteenth century, which Sarkar too had embraced – although, as I have sought to underline, not without qualms.

Harp of Burma follows a unit of Japanese soldiers in Burma when the tide of the war had already turned against Japan. The Japanese occupation forces in Burma were then caught up in an overwhelming calamity. Overextended, their supply lines cut, their air power exhausted, pushed into a grossly unwise new invasion (of India), and with Japan itself besieged, they were reduced to a starving, sick and beaten force, retreating before the British-Indian drive towards Malaya.^[98] They were very far from the Tsushima Sea of Sarkar's imagination. Takeyama does not dwell on their misery: he gives us, for the most part, a story of homesick but cheerful soldiers that could easily have been published before the war. There are no references to the intense resentment of officers and hatred of the army that we find in post-war Japanese veteran's literature like Hiroshi Noma's novel *Zone of Emptiness*, and there is no brutality of occupation; the Burmese themselves are absent from much of the story.^[99]

Two thirds of the way into the novel, however, there is shift. One Japanese unit, having surrendered to British troops who treat them humanely, decides to encourage another unit to surrender rather than fight it out in what would be a futile and bloody battle. They dispatch a corporal named Mizushima – a gifted musician with a harp and a talking parrot – to talk to their fellow-Japanese. Mizushima fails to return from his mission, and his old comrades, interned in a POW camp, are unsure whether he is dead or alive. Then an unrecognizable Buddhist monk with a harp and a parrot appears near the camp fence, and although he will not speak to them, he sends them a letter. This letter – Mizushima’s letter, detailing what had happened to him – forms the final one-third of the novel.

It is, as his old comrades (who read it aloud) declare, an astonishing letter, not only because of the fate that Takeyama imagined for his emissary, but because of its ideological significance for the Japanese model of Asian resurgence. Mizushima had reached the other Japanese unit, but the soldiers had called him a coward and a traitor and thrown him out of the cave they insisted on defending to the death. Having failed to avert the battle and wounded in the shelling, he wanders through the jungle and is rescued by head-hunting cannibals, who nurse him back to health but, naturally, want to eat him when he is better. Through a combination of luck and persuasion, he manages to avert this fate, only to have the cannibal chief insist that he marry his daughter. This danger too is averted (the chief withdraws the offer when he learns that Mizushima has never taken a human head), and Mizushima is allowed to leave.[\[100\]](#)

The soldier falls in with Burmese monks, witnesses Burmese funeral rituals, immerses himself in the beauty of the land and the culture, and stumbles across fields strewn with the Japanese dead, who he tries in vain to bury. There are too many, he concludes with despair. He spies on a British military hospital and a mortuary, and hears from the Burmese about the terrible travails of the retreating Japanese. He enters a Buddhist monastery; he enters also a statue of the Buddha through a hidden entrance in the foot of the Buddha. He finds himself transformed: he realizes he has actually become Burmese and a Buddhist monk, and is no longer pretending in order to hide out among them. He resumes his abandoned task of cremating and burying the

bodies of the dead soldiers, absorbing their desolation into himself. 'I shall not return to Japan,' he writes in his letter.^[101]

Mizushima's letter is an extraordinarily rich text, in part, because it overlaps existing narratives of the modern experience of empire. The story of being captured by cannibals who might either eat you or marry you is, for instance, not simply a bit of comedy, but a recognizable trope that we find from John Smith in the 'New World' to Dudhnath Tewari in the Andaman Islands: a narrative of the combined fear, attraction and nervous amusement at the prospect of falling out of civilization and being swallowed by the jungle beyond the colony.^[102] Such narratives also convey, as Obeyesekere and Said have suggested, the European subject's secret desire for apotheosis, and the construction of the tropics as a world where ordinary whites suddenly became gods or supermen.^[103] There were colored versions of these fantasies – the Indian middle class of Sarkar's era certainly had theirs, typically formatted as children's literature^[104] – and Japanese modernity and imperialism had generated a particularly vivid one. The opening of the Japanese soldier's eyes to the beauty of the occupied country parallels John Flory's love of Burma; Takeyama, like Orwell, was suggesting that disillusionment with empire – and falling out of the community of colonizers – opens new windows of love and aesthetics.^[105]

It is a rich text also because Takeyama suggests the possibility – and the necessity – of transformation, not just of the citizen-soldier but of the nation-state itself. Like an Orientalist Buddha that Herman Hesse might have recognized, Mizushima says:

'We Japanese have not cared to make strenuous spiritual efforts. We have not even recognized their value. What we stressed was merely a man's abilities, the things he could do – not what kind of man he was, how he lived, or the depth of his understanding. Of perfection as a human being, of humility, stoicism, holiness, the capacity of gain salvation and to help others toward it – of all these virtues we were left ignorant.

I was harassed by tormenting questions. Why does so much misery exist in the world?

I never cease to marvel that the people of Burma, though certainly indolent, pleasure-seeking, and careless, are all cheerful, modest, and happy. Free from greed, they are at peace with themselves. While living among them, I have come to believe that these are precious human qualities.

Our country has aged a war, lost it, and is now suffering. That is because we were greedy, because we had only a superficial idea of civilization. Of course we cannot be as languid as the people of this country, and dream our lives away as they often do. But can we not remain energetic and yet be less avaricious? Is that not essential – for the Japanese and for all humanity? [\[106\]](#)

Takeyama understands that the chances of rebuilding the nation-state along those lines – ‘energetic and yet [not] avaricious’ – are slim. It remains uncertain whether the ‘traitor’ who refuses to return to his homeland, who refers to himself as a Burmese monk, and yet devotes himself to burying the rotting bodies of his erstwhile comrades and continues to use the pronoun ‘we’ to refer to the Japanese, is or is not a deserter. The soldier who has been systematically torn down by the experience of misery, death and redemption must live outside the nation-state, burying the victims of the nation in an endless task that is both a penance and a healing of the world: a rather different medicine from what Sarkar had prescribed for Japan.

Takeyama was not alone in thinking along these lines in post-war Japan. Whereas he clearly drew his inspiration from Buddhism, the philosopher Hajime Tanabe looked westwards, towards Christianity in general and Kierkegaard in particular. Unlike Takeyama, Tanabe was well-known in the world of letters: he had lectured extensively in Europe, especially Germany. He and Sarkar had, in fact, been in Germany at exactly the same time: the early years of the Weimar state, with its characteristic swirl of republican politics, labor radicalism, angry veterans and anti-democratic resentment. [\[107\]](#) Tanabe had been a member of Heidegger’s circle of colleagues, and it is not altogether surprising that he (along with other faculty at Kyoto University) was subsequently accused of having entertained fascist sympathies and encouraged the Japanese state of war. It was during the war that he developed his philosophy of metanoesis

or *zange*, which placed a heavy emphasis on the total self-abnegation of the individual. Tanabe wrote:

'Zange is...a balm for the pain of repentance. Through zange we regard ourselves as truly not deserving to be, and therefore enter fully into a state of despair leading to self-surrender. After the submissive acknowledgment and frank confession of our valuelessness and meaninglessness, of our rebelliousness in asserting ourselves despite our valuelessness, we rediscover our being. In this way, our being undergoes at once both negation and affirmation through absolute transformation.'^[108]

James Heisig has argued that those who accused Tanabe of facilitating Japanese militarism by devaluing the individual missed the point of *zange*, which is rooted in Tanabe's broader concept of the 'logic of species.' A large part of the logic of species is a theory of the relationship between the individual, society and the world, and the implications of this relationship for freedom and responsibility. The individual, for Tanabe, did not spring unmediated from the world in the form of a world-citizen or cosmopolitan. The community – usually articulated as the nation – remained a necessary medium. This dynamic might be read as an endorsement of the reality of the nation and its prioritization over the individual. Tanabe, however, emphasized two positions that deflate that interpretation. One is that the community was not closed or insulated: it existed to facilitate contact with the world and interpenetration with other communities. The other is that the individual must be free both *from* the contingencies imposed by the community, and *for* the contingencies of community.^[109] Moral responsibility thus devolved clearly to the level of the individual actor.

Self-abnegation by the individual citizen thus did not imply the abdication of the conscience to the state. It indicated the acceptance of responsibility by the individual for the actions of the community, and a commitment to act upon the community. For Tanabe at the end of the war, *zange* was a process of introspection and repentance: a necessary death that would produce rebirth and regeneration in the form of love, and as Heisig noted, the possibility of a radically reoriented world-history:

‘Against all the culture-worshipping voices of intellectuals raised to invigorate the national spirit for the restoration of Japan, [Tanabe] insisted that it was necessary for Japan to commit itself positively to a sociohistorical praxis based on love – an idea that began in the form of ‘nothingness-*qua*-love’ and evolved into a triunity of ‘God-*qua*-love,’ love of God, and love of neighbor – and aimed at world peace.’^[110]

The self-obliteration of the individual – the Mizushima phenomenon – would not recuperate or reinforce the community; it would initiate its total reformulation and repositioning in the world. Such prescriptions were not altogether ignored in postwar Japan, just as the concerns of ‘rubble literature’ were not insignificant societal forces in postwar Germany.^[111] As Dower has noted, however, introspection and repentance were generally marginal responses to the catastrophe of the vindictive community: ‘we were deceived by our leaders’ was the more pervasive response in Japan (as in Germany). The very structures of state, community and national culture that had earlier been mobilized for war were remobilized for the post-war state.^[112]

For Indian nationalists, the Japanese experience at the end of the Second World War continued to be a spectacle. While it was a less exciting spectacle than what they had seen or imagined in 1905, it again provided opportunities for contemplating the Asian state of war as a political and moral entity. There was little rubble in India, but Japanese rubble, like Japanese warships, could be borrowed and utilized to modulate the distances between East and West, Self and Other, the citizen and the state, the nation and the world. The wreckage of Japan could be incorporated into the vision of the Indian nation, but in ways that were significantly different from what we find in the preceding decades. The model of insurgent nationhood that had begun to fall into place after ‘the event of 1905’ had been destabilized suddenly by the events of 1945.

It is useful, at this point, to remember Justice Radhabinod Pal at the Tokyo War Crimes trials. Pal was the sole Indian on the tribunal; he was also the only judge to find all the defendants ‘not guilty.’ He soon became a hero for the Japanese right wing, although the left too has attempted

to stake its claim.^[113] Pal's famous (or infamous) dissenting judgment was based on two main planks: he argued that the criteria for guilt were established *ex post facto* (he objected especially to the punishment by death of individuals who had not been proved to have committed specific criminal acts), and he pointed out that the victorious allies had turned a blind eye to their own atrocities.^[114] In a well-known essay, Ashis Nandy has made the intriguing suggestion that Pal was motivated more by his understanding of 'Hindu law' than by his knowledge of international law.^[115] Pal was, in fact, not only a highly accomplished jurist, but also an amateur historian of ancient India.

This brings us back to Sarkar, who shared Pal's scholarly interest in ancient Indian cultural codes. They were similar men in many ways, with similar backgrounds and professional trajectories in the interwar colonial state. Both men were part of 'Young India': born in the same year, erudite, worldly, reformist, impatient with tradition, and for that reason, also obsessed with seeking out reassuring continuities between the ancient and the modern. Like Sarkar in Europe and America, Pal in Tokyo was something of a fraud: the representative of a nation-state that did not quite exist. Pal's intervention at the International Tribunal was, very likely, supported by a political sympathy for Japan that Sarkar would have understood instinctively. But if we look closely at Pal's remarks in Tokyo, we find that he wrote: "The name of Justice should not be allowed to be invoked only for the prolongation of the pursuit of vindictive retaliation."^[116] As an indictment of Western *bona fides*, this is familiar; as an ideology of international justice, it is not.

In his study of Pal in Tokyo, Nandy has emphasized that the Indian judge was *not* excusing the crimes of the Japanese leadership, and suggested that his position reflected his 'Hindu' conviction that 'responsibility, even when individual, could be, paradoxically, fully individual only when seen as collective and, in fact, global.'^[117] On the one hand, only individual perpetrators could be punished, and acts committed on the battlefield could not be contextualized (and thus either excused or magnified by, say, pointing to a greater good or evil). On the other hand, Japan's crimes did not belong to the Japanese alone, but to the modern world. Even after making allowances for Nandy's tendency to essentialize, it is fair to say that in 1945, those Indians who were most inclined to empathize with Japan were backing away

simultaneously from state-enacted 'vindictiveness' as a political faith, and from the imperatives of a national masculinity invested in the state that was bound only by the 'law of the fish.'

For Sarkar, the Second World War left a mark of dubious depth. There is no doubt that he was shocked into certain revisions of his view of modernity and the nation-state: 'World-War II which compelled the hyper-civilized peoples to march back to the caves in which the paleolithic races had flourished furnishes us with an occasion for re-examining the foundations of this traditional view of science and philosophy regarding the illiterate,' he wrote shortly before his death.^[118] In a related vein, he revised – or at any rate, adjusted – his vanguardist vision of 'Young India': the expertise of the intellectual and administrative elites of the world had proved to be terribly narrow, he wrote in the same essay. As an active force in society and politics, this gendered expertise – now seen as the basis of a pathological 'hypercivilization' – could not be equated with 'human values' and 'culture,' or prioritized over the values and knowledge of illiterate peasants and laborers of dubious gender.^[119]

Sarkar wrote that essay ('The Social Philosophy of a New Democracy') as the Constituent Assembly of India was nearing the completion of its task. At that critical moment in the history of modern India, which he recognized as being at least as momentous as 1905, he urged Nehru, Ambedkar and their colleagues in the Assembly to follow through on their radical inclinations:

'It is impossible to assert that the peasant as a class in his moral obligations and sense of duty towards [society] is on a lower plane than members of the so-called educated class. The rights of the illiterate ought to constitute in social psychology the foundation of a new democracy. A universal suffrage independent of all considerations as to school-going, ability to read and write or other tests should be the very first postulate of social economics. It is orientations like these that democracy needs today if it is to function as a living faith.'^[120]

This is a different idealist from the man who had, after the First World War, described elite militarism as the engine of democracy and the proving ground of citizenship. He had not, of course, discarded the masculine priority to the extent of disavowing the state itself; that would have been too Gandhian even after Hiroshima. But some of the romance had gone out of the state of war, and the project of 'world-conquest' it signified. It can, of course, also be suggested that with India having become independent, the politics of vindictive militarism had become somewhat less pressing.

Conclusion

It is useful to remind ourselves how remote an observer like Sarkar was from the concerns that animated Tanabe and Takeyama at the end of the Second World War, and also how relevant they were to him. A reader of Sarkar or Nirad Chaudhuri (or Bankim for that matter) might immediately notice a paradox: the war-obsessed nationalist represented a nation with no experience of war.^[121] That lack of war functioned as an innocence or naiveté, but it would be foolish to resort to the cliché that those who have experienced war become anti-war. If that were true, there would have been no German militarism in the interwar period. What is more relevant is that for Sarkar and other Indian nationalists, the lack of an easily identifiable history of war was precisely that: a historical lack.

Theirs was thus a very particular reactionary position. It was only partially affiliated with Volkisch thought, pre-Great-War Romanticism, and the Japanese cult of race-spirit-state-military unity. In Europe, that attitude could survive and even flourish as an interwar mentality for assorted fascists, but the turning-away had already commenced: as Paul Fussell noted, it was difficult, in 1918, to speak the words '*Dulce et decorum est pro patria mori*' without a wince of irony.^[122] In India, however, irony derived not from masculine excess, but, as the satirical writing of Sukumar Ray and others indicates, from the colonial curse of effeminacy.^[123] A large part of Indian nationalism was (and remains, in spite of Sarkar's moment of hesitation in 1949) essentially a permanent pre-war attitude, that of a nation waiting for its war. It is hardly a

coincidence that Savarkar insisted on calling the 1857 revolt the ‘First War of Independence.’ With such an unconvincing ‘first war,’ another one was badly needed, and the avowed cosmopolitans among the nationalists felt the need most acutely.

It can, of course, be said – following Kwame Anthony Appiah – that cosmopolitanism necessarily begins with a primary commitment to one’s own community.^[124] But the gregariousness that Appiah saw in his Ghanaian nationalist family is perhaps not the major mode of cosmopolitanism for middle-class natives contemplating their place in the world, particularly when manhood is at stake. What made emasculation such an effective curse is that colonialism in India had generated the desire for organized violence but not the opportunities, even in the age of revolutionary terrorism. A few poorly-aimed revolvers and grenades only affirmed the condition of impotence, and reaching back to the third century BC was not an adequate compensation. Solace had to be found in the wider world of heavy guns and warships, even if these were in the hands of those whose political ‘color’ was susceptible to instability and disappointment. The nation-state, in other words, had to be imported from the world of international power relations, and then redeployed in that world. Major alterations in the structure of international power relations were only rarely a primary consideration in the narrative of ‘internationalist’ resentment, which remained resolutely focused on national self-assertion along established lines until the very end of the Second World War.

February 26, 2013

Posted by [Satadru Sen](#) at [6:15 PM](#)

The Cultural Emergency

In the past month, two fairly high-profile men in India were charged with hate speech. Akbaruddin Owaisi, a Muslim and a member of the Legislative Assembly in the state of Andhra Pradesh (from an openly sectarian party), made unappreciated remarks about Hindus. Soon afterwards, Praveen Togadia, a leading light of the VHP (a Hindu-chauvinist organization with a large following among expats), made some comments that the government decided were anti-Muslim. The charges filed in the two cases included incitement to rioting, promoting enmity between groups, commission of public nuisance (which, in Indian legal jargon, can also mean pissing on the sidewalk), deliberate outraging of religious feelings, and criminal intimidation.

What exactly did these gentlemen say to get into so much trouble? Well, if you follow the major newspapers and television channels, you would never know, because the media understands that repeating 'hate speech' is itself a cognizable offense. So in a classical rabbit-hole scenario, we have crimes committed and prosecuted that nobody is allowed to talk or hear about. Of course, in these days of the Internet this sort of information is very hard to suppress, and a quick scan of the Web reveals who said what: Owaisi said that if Hindus did not have the police to protect them, Muslims would kick their collective Hindu ass, and Togadia lamented that even the police could not prevent Hindu corpses from piling up during riots. (I had to laugh.) Owaisi did not, you might notice, actually threaten to kick anybody's ass, although that may have been the implication. And Togadia, a bigot who I am loath to defend, did not threaten to pile up Muslim bodies. In fact, both men have said worse on occasion. But this time they got the Indian Penal Code thrown at them.

The rationale behind such policing of 'hate speech' in India is that talk of ass-kicking and piles of bodies 'hurts the sentiments' of some 'community' or the other. And sometimes this fear of pain takes on bizarre administrative forms. On the eve of the Jaipur Literary Festival recently, the police declared that the annual schmooze-fest of self-admiring authors could proceed only if the organizers gave a guarantee that 'nobody's sentiments would be hurt.' (The assurance was given.) This was a reaction to what happened a couple of years ago, when a few authors read aloud from Salman Rushdie, causing great anguish to people who are not his fans. Rushdie has of course been on the frontlines of these sentimental politics since the late 1980s. Most recently, he was refused entry into the city of Calcutta, where the delightful Chief Minister, who has been said to dabble in literature herself, feared that he might hurt people's feelings. Rushdie was

informed that if he came, he would be put on the next plane back to Bombay. It was illegal and utterly cynical: the West Bengal government had first engineered the ‘hurt’ by reminding conservative Muslim leaders to protest Rushdie’s impending visit. The organization that had invited him (for another literary festival, naturally) bravely denied having invited him at all, prompting an angry Rushdie to brandish the reservations that had been made for him and declare that a ‘cultural emergency’ is in place in India.

Now, Rushdie’s outrage about censorship is highly selective: he does not seem to be all that disturbed by, say, the imprisonment of Bradley Manning for spilling the beans on an American massacre in Iraq. But he is right about the cultural emergency. ‘Hurt sentiments’ are its rhetorical signature, and like the original Emergency of 1975-77, it is politically very handy: not only does it facilitate political pandering, it provides a gag for critics of the state. So we have a convergence of silencing maneuvers: Rushdie, M.F. Husain, James Laine, Taslima Nasreen, R.K. Laxman, Ashis Nandy and Kamal Haasan slapped for cultural offenses, and Binayak Sen, Aseem Trivedi, Arundhati Roy and assorted Facebook posters for ‘sedition’ of one kind or another. The Ashis Nandy case (again, in Jaipur!) is particularly interesting, because his defenders and detractors among academics, activists and journalists have commenced an earnest and self-defeating fight over ‘what he really said.’ Not too many have protested that it doesn’t matter what he said – he should not have been threatened with criminal charges and arrest. Heckling, arguing, walking out of the room, and simply refusing to buy the book have evidently gone out of fashion: Indians whose ‘sentiments are hurt’ now go straight to the police and file a First Information Report. (When they don’t resort to physical intimidation, that is.)

Since ‘communities’ and the state are both so easily outraged, it has become rather dangerous to open your mouth within earshot of any audience whose approval you cannot absolutely take for granted. The ramifications for the press are a mixed bag. Established Indian newspapers like the Hindu and the Telegraph are still scathingly critical of the government, although they occasionally take curious vows of silence (what Owaisi/Togadia said) and indulge in coy euphemisms (‘a certain community’). But the upstart media, like Tehelka.com, has not always been so immune from censorial pressure, and the citizen without press credentials is even more vulnerable. In a recent survey of freedom of expression in nearly two hundred countries, India

was ranked somewhere south of 140th. Even allowing for some reasonable skepticism about how the ranking was calculated, this is hardly a point of pride for a democratic society.

How did this state of affairs come to pass? The first thing to bear in mind is that the situation is not straightforwardly undemocratic: more and more Indians *want* restrictions on free speech when it comes to ‘hurting the sentiments of the community.’ In other words, the problem has gone hand in hand with the growth of an identifiable Indian public. As the public has expanded, room for free speech has actually receded. And that is ironic, because if hurting the sentiments of the community was consistently proscribed and punished, then Rammohun Roy, Vidyasagar, Syed Ahmed Khan, Ambedkar and Nehru would all have been locked up or lynched. Without their willingness to offend, there would be no democratic republic to provide a platform for those who are unwilling to be offended. Indian nationhood has historically been inseparable from reformism: from the very outset, even its reactionary wing – Bankim, Tilak, Savarkar – has been reformist on social issues, to the degree that words like ‘reactionary’ become slippery and unhelpful. Since it is impossible to be reformist without also being offensive, the emergence of a virtual ban on the hurting of ‘sentiments’ marks a crisis within the ideology of the Indian nation, in which the democratic impulse and the liberal impulse have effectively blocked each other.

The impasse cannot, however, be blamed entirely on democracy itself, i.e., on the enfranchisement and mobilization of the illiberal masses. We can see it in the Constitution, which was not written by the rabble. Yet this document, in spite of its radical disregard for John Stuart Mill’s insistence that illiterate peasants should not be encouraged to think of themselves as citizens, does not get to freedom of expression until Article 19. It then immediately hedges its bets with ‘reasonable restrictions’: a jungle of clauses and sub-clauses that have, over time, nearly strangled the main article.

While these developments are shaped by factors ranging from court decisions to electoral calculations, they also reflect a construction of ‘tolerance’ that may have been a feature of Indian statecraft for a very long time. Romila Thapar observed, for instance, that the civic ideology of

tolerance in the Mauryan Empire was essentially repressive: speech that offended any social group was punishable by the state, according to the Ashokan edicts. I am not suggesting anything as ahistorical as a straightforward continuity between the third century BC and modern India, but the latter has borrowed quite a few of its icons from the Mauryan Empire, which has become, in nationalist discourse, the foundational episode of the Indian state. Other foundations closer to the present throw up similar perspectives, in which tolerance is imagined as appearing before the state as a collection of respectfully silent communities: separate collectives going about their own business. The elite-level political culture of late-Mughal India represented itself as ‘the Hindus and Mussalmans of Hindustan,’ Rajat Ray reminds us, and certainly the colonial era produced its own powerful vision of corporate peoplehood, made up of ‘peoples,’ ‘tribes and castes,’ ‘two nations,’ and so on.

Such arrangements may have been viable in a pre-modern or a colonial polity, but pose severe problems in a democratic nation-state, not least because they underline that ‘communities,’ not the nation and its individual citizens, are the major claimant upon the state. Indian nationalism, which has drunk from all the above-mentioned historical wells (and the colonial one in particular), has a strong communitarian aspect: citizens and would-be citizens have represented themselves in public more often as members of ‘communities’ than they have as individuals. The man or woman who does not belong to a recognized ‘community’ can be all but invisible to the state. And even belonging to a community can have unpleasant consequences if there is a falling out, as it did for Shah Bano and Roop Kunwar: the former a reluctant outcast, the latter a dubiously consenting super-insider. Indeed, consent – that old flogging-horse of nationalism and gender history in India – becomes incompatible with tolerance if tolerance is defined as a matter of community relations.

The right of the individual to speak freely is thus already rendered somewhat daring and transgressive. It needs a strong state to protect it, and the Indian state is not strong or confident enough. It is, however, often ‘hard,’ in the sense that it is ready to ban films and entertain First Information Reports about who-said-what. A ‘hard state’ – marked by repression – compensates for the lack of the strength that flows ultimately from consent or hegemony. Consequently, the element of farce is never far away. After the Kashmiri militant Afzal Guru was hanged in Delhi last week, newspapers carrying the story were confiscated by the police in

Kashmir – as if this would prevent people from knowing about the execution. What matters more than the actual control of information, as usual, is the [posturing of power](#) as the public face of panic. The liberal vanguard of the republic, fundamentally embarrassed by its inability to conjure up a strong state, has fallen back on hardness as a substitute from the very outset, compromising on the liberalism of their class. Patel is the best example of this, but Nehru (who signed both the Constitution and the [AFSPA](#)) is not exempt either. In the present time, the most prominent such figure is probably P.C. Chidambaram, the current Finance Minister and former Home Minister: very much an upper-class liberal, and also very much an authoritarian.

There is, however, a difference between the sheepish liberals of the Nehru-Patel generation and those of Chidambaram's. The former understood that when a liberal democracy is assembled in violation of Mill's principles of self-government, the vanguard and the state necessarily take on a pedagogical role. Liberal democracy and its various institutions – like free speech – had to be *taught* even as it was put into practice; otherwise either liberalism or democracy would cease to exist. This was in fact a common assumption, approaching a consensus, among the nationalist elite as they contemplated the future Indian state in the decades preceding independence. Since then, it has been steadily undermined, not least because the vanguard – defeated by the combination of the mob and the genuine reactionaries, and diverted into new channels of self-aggrandizement – have abdicated the pedagogical project. In the process, they have managed to sound a lot like Mill. 'We are not ready for that kind of freedom of expression,' said the late great Sunil Gangopadhyay, explaining why his friend and fellow-novelist Taslima Nasreen should be censored.

Moreover, the concept of the pedagogical state has been undermined by the liberals themselves, particularly the intelligentsia, which has not only lost its nerve, but become apologetic about the elitism of the liberal-nationalist project. (Ashis Nandy, ironically, is among the most prominent culprits here.) It is one thing if the anti-elitists have an alternative ideology of the state, or of an anti-state, and the courage and honesty to pursue it in their own lives. They do not. Their anti-liberalism is entirely of the bourgeois-armchair variety. They are too comfortable for the Gandhian anti-state, and the Maoist utopia is not really to their liking either. But as self-hating liberals, they will not acknowledge that the nation-state, in order to remain even moderately democratic, requires the robust and constant promotion of bourgeois fetishes like free speech

and individual rights. The widespread and disingenuous contempt for the individual that emanates from this class tends to facilitate a nexus between the community and the state that has more than a veneer of fascism. The community of 'hurt sentiments,' banned books and gag orders is not, after all, what Partha Chatterjee had in mind in his theorization of political society. (And even that is not as benign as Chatterjee would have us believe.) It is sometimes a convenient political fiction – since it often has leaders and spokespersons, but few followers – and always a bully. When it poses as the nation by hijacking the state, it is an especially cancerous form of nationhood. I must admit that I have a distinctly Goering-like reaction when I hear the word 'community.'

February 12, 2013

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Review: 'Pundits From Pakistan' and 'Brave New Pitch'

Main ne maana ki kuchh nahin Ghalib

Muft haat aye to bura kya hai?

In these darkest of days for Indian cricket fans, I had the pleasure of reading two outstanding books about Indian cricket. *Pundits From Pakistan*, by Rahul Bhattacharya (Pan Macmillan, 2005, 352 pages), is older than the date suggests. The other – Samir Chopra's *Brave New Pitch* (Harper Collins, 2012, 224 pages) – is very contemporary indeed. That time-lag between the two publications is actually very apt, because *Pundits From Pakistan* was written when Indian

cricket was soaring. India had beaten England in England, Australia at home, tied Australia in Australia, and then beaten Pakistan in Pakistan. Chopra's book, on the other hand, has come after an altogether pyrrhic World Cup victory, in the midst of the dead embers of Test cricket in India. The two books are, in that sense, eloquent bookends.

These are very different volumes, and Bhattacharya's book fits more easily into the template of 'good cricket literature.' The writing is clunky in places, but there is nevertheless a touch of Cardus in how the author imagines the game: that unmistakable touch of nostalgia, in which even the present comes to be seen through a sepia curtain of late-afternoon sunshine, or filtered through the crackle of the radio on a cold winter morning. Without that nostalgia, that slight confusion between being awake and dreaming, cricket would not be worth following or even playing.

The trick, when writing in that spirit, is to avoid slipping into the maudlin even as the writer teeters on the edge of sentimentality. Bhattacharya pulls it off. He knows that he is writing at a peculiar moment in the history of Indian cricket: the near-miraculous convergence of Tendulkar, Dravid, Laxman, Ganguly, Sehwag, Kumble and Harbhajan, the dizzying promise of Irfan Pathan, the presence of a talented and nearly inexhaustible supporting cast in Zaheer, Balaji, Nehra, Agarkar, Shiv Sundar Das, Wasim Jaffer and Mohammed Kaif. He knows that Ganguly's captaincy and John Wright's coaching has added something unprecedented to the mix: a magic cocktail of swagger, cool-headedness and professionalism. And he knows that it will not last forever. He is out, therefore, to relish the meal while it lasts. In the process, he treats the reader to the high drama of the matches as well as the throwaway details of a great team on tour: the small encounters in the hotel lobbies and dressing rooms.

The other star of Bhattacharya's narrative is Pakistan. Bhattacharya is quite aware that he is writing about a team that has lost its superstars: this is Pakistan without Waqar Younis and Wasim Akram, to say nothing of Imran Khan, Javed Miandad and Zaheer Abbas. He compensates by giving us intimate portraits of 'lesser' players like Mohammed Sami and Danish Kaneria, and a grand little epic of Inzamam-ul-Haq, who sinks slowly over the course of the

series like the Titanic after a collision with a floating mountain of halwa. Bhattacharya's admiration and affection for the Pakistan captain are palpable. But just as importantly, the retired stars – the Javeds and Imrans – keep intruding into the pages, hotel lobbies and interviews. They are gone and have never gone away: in the best traditions of cricket, the past hovers over the present like a stubborn ghost, imparting continuity between childhood and middle age, supplying that old crackling-radio feeling.

Then there is Pakistan the country, beyond the dressing room. Here, we find another flowering of the stubbornly Romantic nature of cricket writing. Those who follow the sport know that within the small world of Test-level competition, some relationships and rivalries matter more than others. The Ashes, for instance, have taken on a distinctly racial significance: whenever England play Australia, their journalists, fans, players and administrators behave as if they are engaged in a holy and altogether superior ritual, floating high above the world of bloody natives. (The spectacles of Jardine-as-Dracula and Larwood-battering-Woodfull have been replaced entirely by the image of Flintoff making out with Brett Lee.) The India-Pakistan cricket relationship is more fraught, being subject to the actual hostility between the two countries, frequently interrupted sporting ties, the fulminations of Maharashtrian fascists and a beheading or two. It has, nevertheless, its own tragic intimacy, at the heart of which is the opportunity to cross the barbed-wire fence and discover a lost home and a lost half on the other side. Bhattacharya describes banners reading "One Blood" being held up by the crowd. He reminds us of the stitched-together flags and the faces painted in the colors of both countries. In the narratives of spontaneous hospitality and late-night feasts in the bazaars of Lahore, the stories of visas granted and denied, there is the Romantic longing for wholeness that is at the very heart of modern Indian and Pakistani identity; it is more meaningful than victory or defeat in cricket but is, of course, more enjoyable when you win.

This brings me to Samir Chopra's book, which comes at a time when the victories have not only dried up, but quite possibly become extinct. Fittingly, then, whereas Bhattacharya speaks to the fan in a poetry of sorts, Chopra delivers a cold blast of prose in an age when considerations of blood and bootleg Scotch have been overshadowed entirely by dollars and cents. Less than a decade separates the two books and situations, but *Brave New Pitch* comes to us in the era of the Indian Premier League. It is largely about the IPL and the giant shadow it has cast upon the

game. When Chopra began writing the book, the IPL had taken shape but Indian cricket had not yet gone to pieces. When he made the final revisions, he had to account for that sequence of eight defeats in a row against England and Australia. To his credit, he wove that disaster adroitly into his analysis. But his book also makes clear that there is no longer room in Indian cricket for romance of the Cardus-meets-Ghalib variety.

Coming between the starting and the finishing of the book, the Indian disasters in England and Australia (and since then, at home) have divided *Brave New Pitch* into two major themes. One is an issue that has been a part of cricket since the nineteenth century: fair compensation for players. Even more powerfully than Packer and World Series Cricket, the IPL has brought this issue to the forefront, by generating a conflict between the club that pays extremely well and the country that makes moral demands upon the loyalty and identity of the individual cricketer. There is no need to go into the details of the conflict here, but it must be pointed out that fans and cricket journalists – those that have not been bought off by the BCCI, at any rate – have not always been kind to players who have refused to ignore the money on offer at the IPL. Chopra, however, is unequivocal in his sympathy for the players, who are, he points out, entitled to the same financial security that other professionals and workers expect for themselves. In fact, one of the great strengths of the book is that it looks at the current tensions within Indian and world cricket through a clear, historical lens of labor relations. Chopra's knowledge of the economics of American professional sports comes in very handy here, providing his analysis with an easy cosmopolitanism that is rare in the insular worlds of sports history.

The other main theme of *Brave New Pitch* – the undeniable damage done by the IPL to the quality and international competitiveness of Indian cricket – is somewhat at odds with the author's inclination to see the IPL as a good thing for Indian cricketers. That, however, is not so much an inconsistency in the analysis as a reflection of the twisted and unresolved situation within the administration of the sport in India (and to some extent, the world). Chopra is aware that the initial hopes – which he shared – that the IPL could be accommodated into a reasonable calendar of international cricket, while generating money, security, entertainment and a higher standard of play, have not worked out. He insightfully explains why this has been the case: the naked conflicts of interest between the ownership of IPL teams and the management of the BCCI (which are often in the hands of the same people), and the growth of what he calls India's

‘gold-rush economy,’ in which the primary impulse of entrepreneur-administrators is to utilize new money-making opportunities to get very rich very quickly, with minimal regulation, oversight or judicial intervention. He acknowledges that the changed demographics of the Indian crowd have partially vacated the old Romantic mansion of cricket, but points out that even the post-Romantic IPL-era crowd has been shortchanged by the mafia of cricket bosses and corporate bean-counters.

Like other thoughtful commentators on Indian cricket, Chopra has very good ideas about ‘what needs to be done’: changes in the structure of domestic First Class cricket, infrastructural and professional support for the game at the local level, adjustments in the format of Test and one-day cricket, and so on. One may or may not agree with the particular suggestions he makes. What is more pertinent is the author’s perceptible pessimism about whether sensible reforms, transparency and accountability can be implemented in the current economic and bureaucratic environment. The game has passed from the hands of players and dreamers – however tenuous their grasp may have been in the past – and now resides entirely with those who are determined to suck it dry until it is dead, and then move on.

No review is complete without some nitpicking, and I do have a nit to pick: Chopra wastes far too much printer’s ink on the issue of popularizing cricket beyond its historical base in the Commonwealth countries. This has recently been a favorite pipedream of cricket writers as well as a pet project of the ICC. Planning for the return of cricket to America, beyond the enclaves of Commonwealth expats, is not a serious use of anybody’s time. Nor, one might add, is it important that the ‘average American’ in Philadelphia and elsewhere play cricket. All sports are played in specific historical contexts, and cricket has its own context and its geography. The fantasy of expansion is unnecessary, especially when there are real problems to address.

All things considered, however, Chopra has written one of the most thought-provoking and knowledgeable cricket books to be published in recent years. He writes with a keen sense of history: not just the history of the game, but that of the world in which the game is played. That alone places him head and shoulders above most other contemporary cricket writers: above, for

instance, Gideon Haigh, who writes with an encyclopedic knowledge of the sport but little sensitivity to the political and social realities that motivate those who follow the game. In having an ‘ear’ for these realities, Chopra is not so far removed from Bhattacharya, in spite of the prosaic tone of his writing.

February 5, 2013

Posted by [Satadru Sen](#) at [12:43 PM](#) [Links to this post](#)

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Black Man, Brown Men

On April 22 of last year, Yannick Nihangaza was set upon by a crowd of eight or nine young men in Jalandhar, in the Indian state of Punjab. The twenty-three-year computer science student from Burundi, on his way to a party, was beaten with extreme savagery – rocks and chunks of cement were used – and left for dead. Nihangaza went into a coma from which he has only now emerged. His brain is damaged, his cognitive functions are more or less destroyed, and he is unlikely to speak again.

The Nihangaza case has attracted much less attention in India and elsewhere than the horror that befell Jyoti Pandey – another twenty-three-year-old student – on [a bus in Delhi](#) recently. And it can certainly be argued that the incidents are not comparable. They are both examples of the public violence that is increasingly recognized as a fact of life in urban India, but whereas the

rape, torture and killing of Pandey was obviously a gender crime, the assault on Nihangaza had to do with race. (The police report stated that the attackers had declared their intent to 'teach the black a lesson.' It remained unclear for months whether they targeted Nihangaza specifically or if it was a case of mistaken identity, but now it seems that there had been an 'altercation' with Nihangaza shortly before the assault.)

But at an instinctive level, for me and a few others, what holds these episodes together is their shared 'north Indian' character. And with thinking that, not to mention posting the thought on the Internet, comes the obligation to justify or rethink the assumption. Lynching was not invented in north India, after all: it has an impeccable American genealogy. Racially motivated assaults remain a fact of life on the streets of European cities; racist violence against Indian students in Australia recently has received much attention in the Indian press and in diplomatic channels. (An irony of the Nihangaza case is that one suspect has fled to Australia on a student visa. It is tempting to hope that he learns a lesson or two.) Indian cities outside the north – Pune, even Bangalore – have an established record of discrimination and harassment when it comes to Africans, although assaults are rare. It was in Mumbai, that most self-consciously cosmopolitan of Indian cities, that the black Australian cricketer Andrew Symonds was subjected to monkey gestures by the crowd. And certainly rural India has a rich history of lynching, which (along with rape) has typically been a tactic of power used against 'uppity' Dalits and aboriginal people. So what, if anything, does it mean to say that the Nihangaza assault and the Pandey rape are 'north Indian,' apart from signifying your own prejudices?

A casual look at the public spaces of the Indian north, compared with those of the south, reveals right away that the northern street is a relatively homosocial space, populated largely by males. Women commonly serve beer in restaurants in the south. In the north, that would be nothing short of a sign of prostitution or moral 'denationalization,' and in either case, an 'invitation' to sexual abuse, even rape. (The courts in Delhi have recently ruled that the city cannot prevent women from working as bartenders, but a woman bartender in Delhi had better wear body armor and a chastity belt.) Given the peculiarities of Indian national discourse, denationalization – to be excluded from the moral community of Indianness – is also to be excluded from 'honorable' womanhood, and to be left vulnerable to the consequences of dishonor. But rape is not the only form of violence that is produced when women are absent

from public spaces in India. I would argue that what happened to Yannick Nihangaza is also a product of this absence.

I am not suggesting that the presence of women in public spaces has a ‘civilizing’ or ‘moral’ influence – in the Victorian sense of civilization and morality – on male behavior. I am saying, rather, that the absence or presence of women in the streets, bars and assorted places of congregation indicates whether a serious problem already exists. It indicates, first of all, a set of problems that men of that society have with women, such as the reluctance to accept women as equals in public (which means, inevitably, in private as well), the readiness to see them as transgressors, threats, curiosities or ‘fair game’ when they appear in public, and the simple, tragic, deadly ignorance of *how* to interact with ‘public women’ in a manner that is both egalitarian and courteous, i.e., not tied up in notions of honor and dishonor. (One of the most depressing things about the aftermath of Jyoti Pandey’s rape was the number of Indians who sought to shield women behind concepts of honor, declaring that Indians either do, or should, treat women with ‘reverence.’ Reverence, unfortunately, is nothing but the other side of the coin of contempt: as soon as a woman has been demarcated as a repository of honor, she becomes a target for dishonor.)

It indicates, secondly, a warped culture of maleness, in which masculinity in public spaces is enacted for other men alone. This male subculture is marked by the continuous experience of desire, repression and display. It takes the form, for instance, of simultaneous homoeroticism and homophobia. It also takes the form of hypermachismo and showing off through aggression: experiencing and displaying manhood largely through violence, whether that violence is directed at women or at other men. Needless to say, this is not exclusively a north-Indian phenomenon, nor is it equally apparent everywhere in the north. But within India, ‘north India’ is to some extent a state of mind, disseminated as well as concentrated by Hindi cinema into a national popular culture of reactionary gender relations and homosocial masculinity. Its indigenous systems of restraint, such as ‘reverence’ for women or guests (the *mehmaan*, which Nihangaza arguably was in India) have proved to be tissue-thin in the face of its need to occupy and monopolize public space.

It can and should be noted that Enoch Powell's England or the American South of the Jim Crow era were not saved from lynch mobs or skinheads by the presence of women in public. Problems within the ideology of heterosexual masculinity played a role in those places also, but with overdetermined phenomena like public violence we need to disaggregate the variables very carefully. The racial presumptions that applied when, say, Kiaran Stapleton shot Anuj Bidve in Salford in 2011, do not fully apply in India in a case such as Nihangaza's beating, or even in a less devastating episode like the taunting of Andrew Symonds. Color 'preference' is as Indian as tandoori chicken, and like tandoori chicken, it is more deeply rooted and also more nakedly visible in the north. It is, arguably, even worse in Pakistan, where any need to accommodate the darkies within the community aesthetic evaporated after 1971. But race is more than color of skin or place or origin: it is an encyclopedic body of knowledge, nearly all of it bogus, which is shared very unevenly across cultures. The Indians that attacked Nihangaza would have had some awareness of the Western meanings of race, blackness, and so on, thanks to the various processes of cultural globalization. But it would have been superficial: enough to identify an outsider, but not enough to inspire murderous hate.

That hate comes from forces and processes closer to home, that are reshaping, but only partially, how gender, hegemony and dominance work in Indian society. It is important to understand that the attacks on Yannick Nihangaza and Jyoti Pandey represent a *new* phenomenon. They derive only partially from 'Indian culture.' (Tandoori chicken is not that old either.) The transformation of the Indian economy and class relations over the past two decades (in Punjab, it began earlier) has been a major factor in their emergence. Nihangaza was enrolled in an institution called Lovely Professional University. The name itself is a giveaway: a new, entirely commercially driven, somewhat subliterate vocational school (not unlike academies with names like 'Vista' and 'Horizon' that are advertised on the New York City subway), promising middle-class lives to those who would not have been part of the middle class a generation ago. These are start-up institutions for start-ups and gatecrashers, both Indian and African. The attack took place in Jalandhar: a mid-sized provincial city that has become cosmopolitan and prosperous without shedding its provinciality. And in a sense, it could have happened only in Jalandhar, which is both a place and a metaphor. The new economy has created a brash and rough-edged new middle class, in which older notions of respectability and expectations of masculine public space have persisted even as affluence and power have done away with deference, and globalization has introduced new sexual desires, greatly intensified repressions, and newly 'legitimate' targets of violence – such as black people.

Like Jyoti Pandey's death, Yannick Nihangaza's fate is a tragedy that cannot be repaired. [His father has spent a great deal of time in India](#), trying to get an apathetic and reluctant Punjab government to take the case seriously. To their credit, the state government has (belatedly) covered the medical expenses, made the arrests, and offered – rather too eagerly – to transfer Nihangaza back to Burundi. To their discredit, they are now denying (in spite of their own police report) that the attack had [anything to do with race](#). And gender does not enter the discussion at all. So it goes, Kurt Vonnegut would have said.

January 20, 2013

Posted by [Satadru Sen](#) at [12:35 AM](#) [Links to this post](#)

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Sparing the Rod



From Newtown to Delhi

In this final month of the year, we (a notoriously vague pronoun, perhaps best reduced to the royal 'we') were distracted from our everyday lives by two visitations of unimaginable horror. In Newtown, Connecticut, twenty children were gunned down in their elementary school, along with a half-dozen teachers. And in Delhi, a young woman was raped on a bus, attacked with an iron rod, and then tossed out to die. These are, of course, disconnected incidents, one deadlier than the other, on opposite sides of the world and indicative of different social pathologies. Nevertheless, I want to discuss them in the same frame, not only because they merged in my stomach into a single pool of unexpressed vomit, but also because they suggest some connections between how modern societies generate and respond to extreme violence. In each case, there is a discernible tendency to reduce the problem to a set of symptoms that can be treated with legislation. In each case, there is an explosion of speech around a pit of silence that shields a wider societal culpability.

In a country where school shootings are fairly common, the slaughter in Connecticut was especially horrifying because children were so young, and because the killer was more or less an adult. The American school massacre typically features teenagers being shot by one of themselves: we have learned how to think, talk, and even write black comedies about that scenario. We have not learned to think about child-murder as an act of shooting downwards. We have not learned to imagine what happens to a six-year-old body when it is shot eleven times with a version of the same rifle that is used by the US military. We have learned to accept that school shootings leave some students dead and others wounded, but not to face a situation where there are no wounded, because each child has been carefully executed at close range. I found myself wondering how there could be space for eleven rifle bullets in such small bodies. I could not imagine an answer, so I fell back to thinking of my own daughter, and wanting to pick her up early from daycare and wrap my arms around her small, solemn self. That reaction, I

think, was fairly common among friends of mine who have young children, and for parents around the country. We personalized the calamity, withdrawing into ourselves and our families.

In that maneuver, as in all maneuvers, certain refusals and silences are imbedded: the refusal, for instance, to put ourselves fully in the shoes of the police and other first-response personnel who entered the school when the shooting was over. We talk around what they saw: we sympathize with their predicament, we acknowledge that they will be scarred, we are relieved that they have taken that responsibility off our shoulders. We do not invite them to actually *describe* what they saw. Not even the New York Post will seek out the initial police photographs for its front page. Such images will perhaps be left to the horror movies in ten years' time, but even then, no director would dare to actually 'show what happened,' or linger on the visions for more than a split second.

To do those things would shut us down as a society. It would shut us down not only because it would show us the costs of the Second Amendment, the NRA, inadequate mental health care, and other such specific phenomena, but also because it would show us what we are capable of as a society, and indeed, what we routinely do as a society. It is not, after all, enough of an explanation that Adam Lanza, the killer in Newtown, was mentally ill, or even that he had access to guns. He also had a particular vision of what a man in his situation does, and that vision included shooting first-graders. An individual acts according to the templates with which he is provided, such as the template of the massacre by an angry man (or, for that matter, templates of men having fun in particular ways). Adam Lanza followed the template.

What I am getting at is that killing children is not all that extraordinary in our society. It can, in fact, become almost casual. I am reminded of the supersaturation of popular culture – especially the culture of young males – with the toys, games and pornography of violence, which make shooting at people harmless, aesthetically pleasing and erotic. I am reminded that our most normative form of political organization is based on the idea of legitimate homicide, so that the willingness and ability to kill permeates our idea of what it is to live a worthwhile life. I am reminded of [Seymour Hersh's reporting](#) on the My Lai massacre, the phenomenon of 'collateral

damage,' and the entire premise of nuclear deterrence and strategic bombing. We accept that children will be shot, burned or blown up. We expect only that it will not be our children and that we will not have to look, and are flustered when Hersh – or Adam Lanza – violates that tacit agreement.

Now, on to Delhi: the city where roads, rebels, refugees, invaders, migrant workers and graduate students converge, the city that is always the destination and a little too far, *Dilli chalo* and *Dilli durast*, where my wife - unnerved by the experience of being stared at by yet another open-mouthed stranger - snarled '*Kya dekh rahe ho ji? Ghar mein ma-behn nahin hai?*' ('What the hell are you staring at? Don't you have a mother or sister at home?') I was reminded of Captain Haddock's encounter with a Nepali porter.) Delhi is simultaneously graceful and ugly, it tends to set women and even men on edge, it has a reputation, it is the notorious 'rape capital.' That sobriquet may be unfair; there are cities where women fare worse. But in Delhi, crowds of angry citizens have been facing off against police armed with water-cannons. They are angry because there has been another rape in the Indian capital. A young paramedical student and her male friend, returning from watching *Life of Pi*, were waiting at a bus stop at around ten o'clock at night. They were given a ride by an off-duty bus. The bus crew and their joyriding friends – six men in all – immediately began to taunt the couple, then attacked them, beating the man unconscious and raping the woman for over forty minutes. Thrown out of the bus, the victims were discovered by passers-by and hospitalized. The media then descended upon the story, and a crescendo of public rage quickly developed, directed at the government, the police, and Delhi itself. There have been calls in Parliament to amend the law and institute the death penalty for rape; the demand appears to have overwhelming public support.

On the surface, the violence inflicted upon the couple in this particular case is appalling but not extraordinarily so – not at the level needed to bring out enraged citizenry, water-cannon and hangmen. Yes, the couple had been badly beaten; yes, the woman had been raped; but those things happen in Delhi, and in other cities. Other people shake their heads and carry on. The extraordinary horror of the bus rape lies below the surface. Tucked away in the coverage of the incident, on the first day, was a report of just what been done to the woman by her attackers. She had been raped *with* an iron rod (specifically, the crank that is used to raise and lower the

jack), rupturing her uterus and destroying her intestines. Doctors expected that she would die, and it speaks volumes for the staff at Safdarjung Hospital that she is still alive.

From the second day onwards, as if by a quiet agreement, the details of the assault vanished from the news. The story continued to dominate the news but the text changed subtly. A coded language emerged: the woman had been ‘beaten’ with the iron rod, although it had become necessary for surgeons to remove nearly her entire intestinal tract, the attackers were ‘sadistic,’ they had ‘tortured’ the woman, the police chief had never before encountered such a brutal rape. Nobody is deluded about what happened on the bus, of course. Everybody knows exactly what took place, and is horrified. That is why there are crowds, police batons and panicky politicians on the streets. But the particulars were deemed so shameful, so unspeakable, that they had to be rendered in a combination of silences and codes.

How do we unpack the horror that is shrouded by this rendition? In an editorial in *The Hindu*, Ratna Kapur offered [one approach](#). The attack on the unnamed woman (who is now being called Amanat in the press, in yet another display of coded speech) represents the fury of men confronted with ‘smartly dressed women’ in all walks of Indian life, Kapur wrote: as men perceive themselves losing exclusive control of their social and economic bastions, they (and the less educationally and economically competitive among them in particular) are lashing out violently.

That insight, while not quite new, is reasonable enough, and revealing beyond the author’s intentions. The incident has laid bare, especially, the class tensions of urban India. In an unmistakable yet unthinking attempt at restoring the disturbed balance of power between the ghetto and the gated community, middle-class journalists armed with television cameras, blinding lights and great hairy microphones descended upon the slum where the alleged rapists lived, barged into their homes, and interviewed the cowering families about what should happen to their sons, not letting up until one obviously intimidated father agreed that hanging was the only acceptable option. It is inconceivable that power, privilege and presumption would have

been deployed so contemptuously towards 'respectable' Delhiites in Defence Colony or Vasant Vihar.

Kapur's analysis is also somewhat incomplete. For one, the woman on the bus does not seem to have belonged to the 'smartly dressed' set of middle-class Indians: her family comes from the subsistence level of the economy, although they clearly had middle-class aspirations. For another, while it is certainly true that middle-class women in Delhi and other Indian cities are vulnerable to sexual assault, the likelihood of their being raped by the proverbial rogue autorickshaw driver is considerably lower than that possibility that rural, poor, Dalit or tribal women will be sexually assaulted by a policeman, an employer, a village politician, a neighborhood bully or a husband. This is a pattern of violence that middle-class Indians are aware of, but prefer not to look at. Their adoption of the bus-rape victim as one of their own was almost accidental: a slippage within liberal citizenship, as well as a sentimentality.

Consequently, Kapur's essay only obliquely explains the explosive public reaction to the bus rape: the unedifying and ubiquitous calls for the death penalty and castration, the near-rioting which may have cost a policeman his life, the violence unleashed on the protesters – in the name of crowd control – by an angry police force and a beleaguered administration. The Indian middle class does not typically react to rapes with such extraordinary vehemence. It has been suggested that the protests of this December are about more than this particular incident: that they form an extension of the middle-class disenchantment with the nature of the Indian state, which became evident during the Lokpal movement a couple of years ago. ('Nothing works,' as one angry demonstrator shouted at a journalist.) In other words, while we are ostensibly talking about a rape, we could also be talking about the municipal water supply, the mismanagement of the Commonwealth Games or cronyism in land development.

I would suggest that that analysis too, while entirely accurate, is quite inadequate. Its inadequacy is indicated by the violence of the protests – the startling rhetoric of mutilation and hanging – as well as by the gaps in what is being said about the rape of 'India's Amanat.' Much like the Newtown massacre, the naked savagery of the assault has forced a traumatic surfacing

into the public consciousness of the violence woven into everyday reality of Indian nationhood: the violence of gender and class, the violence of the state, the violence within families, the violence of the mob in Gujarat in 2002 (where disemboweled Muslim women were effectively disowned by the nation).

Like child-murder in American culture, that violence lies below the skin of society; it is intractable, overwhelming and intimately familiar. In it, there is an unbearable interpenetration of the ordinary and the extraordinary: the extraordinary is within the ordinary, and vice versa. Rape with a 'foreign object,' perpetrated by a gang of drunk and laughing young men, may appear to overshoot all templates of masculinity, violence and community, but it is the template: a part of the cultural mainstream. For all its horror and outrage, the Delhi incident has already passed into advertisements for Amul butter. Some years ago, when a woman was raped with a flashlight (and murdered) off the Eastern Metropolitan Bypass in Calcutta, a defensive/dismissive Jyoti Basu remarked, 'These things happen.' (*Ei rokom to hoyei thake.*)

'These things' thus have to be acknowledged as real, even commonplace; yet they cannot be spoken in the ordinary way. How do you talk about rape with a tire iron without talking about pathological gender norms? How do you talk about violence and gender without talking about the family, labor relations, the Armed Forces Special Powers Act, and the implication of all sections of society in all of the above? It would be like discussing the bayonet rapes of Nanjing without raising broader questions about the organization of life and thought in 1930s Japan. It is easier to *not* talk: i.e., to talk *around* the particulars of yet another rape, about 'anti-social elements' or poor government or the death penalty for rapists. The periodic, anguished howl of the mob takes the place of what cannot be spoken by liberal citizens confronted by the limits of liberalism.



December 26, 2012

Posted by [Satadru Sen](#) at [12:53 AM](#)

The View From Rezang La

I want to use this essay to ramble about anniversaries. Not the private kind – I feel modest – but the kind that is shared, remembered and imagined by millions of people at once. This autumn is the fiftieth anniversary of the India-China war, which the Indians lost. And almost exactly four years ago, a twenty-year-old Pakistani named Ajmal Kasab and nine of his colleagues went on a three-day shooting spree in Bombay. They killed one hundred and sixty-four people before they were overpowered by the security forces. Kasab was the only one captured alive. Last week he was hanged in a hidden corner of Pune’s Yeravda Prison, which used to be a sort of second home for Mahatma Gandhi.

The 1962 war left us with one unforgettable image, and quite a few that were quickly forgotten. Ironically, the unforgettable one is not a photograph but an act of imagination, a sort of charcoal drawing scratched by modern subjects from verbal reports that have become obscure. It is the image of the men of Charlie Company of the 13th Battalion of the Kumaon Regiment, frozen in a snowfield at Rezang La, in an extraordinary tableau of death. Their heads and shoulders protrude from the whiteness of the mountain pass sixteen thousand feet above sea level; in their hands are rifles, ammunition belts, syringes and bandages. Since it is not a photograph, we are free to imagine their faces according to our ideological inclinations: heroic and defiant, contorted from the impact of bullets and bayonets, or frightened and calling for their mothers. Of the one hundred and twenty-three outgunned and outnumbered men defending Rezang La on the night of November 18, all but seven were killed in a brutal battle that ended with hand-to-hand combat as the post was overrun. The Chinese suffered five hundred casualties - or considerably more, by some accounts. The war ended the next day as the Chinese declared a ceasefire and pulled back; Rezang La was the last major action of the conflict. Two months later, at the peak of the Himalayan winter, the dead of Charlie Company were discovered by a shepherd in what had by then become a no-man's-land between India and China. It was only later that a photographic image (below) entered the picture, and it involved a survivor of Rezang La, not the dead, posing in a predictably heroic-defiant mode.



Ram Kumar

The other image from the 1962 war that I have in mind is also actually from 1963. It is a photograph – very likely carefully staged and edited, and hence fixed in the specificity of its content, unlike the unruly ghosts of Rezang La – of the new Indian Prime Minister, Lal Bahadur Shastri, posing with suspiciously Chinese-looking children in the Deoli detention camp for enemy aliens. Shastri is smiling. The children are smiling. The other adults are smiling. The detention camp might as well be a holiday camp. It was a holiday camp that lasted nearly two decades, safely removed from public consciousness. Its memory survived as a sort of rumor until the unpredictable forces of the anniversary business washed it up on the pages of *The Hindu*, unnerving the readers of even that notoriously leftist newspaper.



1962 occupies a peculiar place in what might be considered ‘the Indian memory’: simultaneously livid and empty. Most Indians remember nothing at all: the number means nothing to them as a

date or an event. I doubt very much that a Bihari sharecropper or even a Calcutta cabbie knows or cares about what happened in Ladakh and Arunachal Pradesh (then the North-East Frontier Agency) that fall, when the Indian Army disintegrated in the thin air of the mountains, and Nehru appeared to say goodbye to the people of Assam. But for the Indian middle class, the episode left a scar – consisting mostly of shame – that has endured remarkably well.

That remembrance of a lost war, which has increasingly acquired an obsessive quality, is not inherently odd. Memories of defeat are integral to European nationalisms, for instance. But in the Indian case, the nationalist classes were not themselves present on the battlefield in any significant numbers, apart from the officers. Battles like Rezang La, Walong and Thagla Ridge were fought by country boys with give-away names like Ram Kumar: peasants from the hills of Kumaon, Garhwal and Darjeeling who had undoubtedly been socialized into a kind of national consciousness by the army, but who were nevertheless quite distinct from the classes that owned the dominant discourses of Indian nationhood, and that were most traumatized by the outcome of the war. The scarred memory of 1962 is thus partly a false or borrowed trauma, acquired as middle-class nationalists appropriated subalterns as their historical cricket team. But partly, it is a trauma in the discourse itself: a nearly unbearable blemish in the narrative of an Asian power emerging from colonial rule to claim its place in the sun. And as the middle class has expanded sideways and downwards, the scar has expanded as well, so that 1962 has become a defining moment of sorts in the trajectory of what it means to be Indian. It has to do with feeling ashamed, which is a fate common to all colonized people.

So now that the Golden Jubilee of the war has come around, more people than ever are conjuring up the ghosts of Rezang La, who crowd out the larger picture of disgrace: the political and strategic mistakes, the total collapse (in the NEFA) of the fabled Red Eagle Division that stopped the Germans and Italians in North Africa twenty years before, the goodbye to Assam, and mental images of soldiers without winter clothes and snow boots limping wearily down the mountain.

My own language is suspect, and it should be. Whose ‘fable’ was the Red Eagle Division? A British-colonial fable, for the most part, and one that gives away the discomfort at the heart of Indian nationhood: its fables are not necessarily its own. Rezang La is fabulous precisely because it contains a trace of Thermopylae, an echo of Verdun (Ils ne passeront pas!), and snatches of Tennyson. Even when we are dealing with what is ostensibly our ‘own’ history, the ground beneath our feet is not reliably Indian, and that injects a note of hysteria into the narrative. Nevertheless, a middle class that can adopt peasant soldiers as its cricket team can also adopt European mythologies as the stuff of its autobiography, and these fables of Red Eagles and Greeks now have an authentic national clientele that is embarrassed by the slide from El Alamein to NEFA, when there should have been an ascent. People are surprised, and even irate, that the Chinese do not seem to remember the war or care about having won, when Indians care so much about having lost. (Very inscrutable, those Chinese.) The questions that, for forty-odd years, concerned only military and diplomatic historians, are now eagerly dissected by a wider body of netizens: who started it, who was right, was Nehru naïve, could air power have made a difference, and most importantly, are we still so shameful/shameless?

The answers that are produced in the course of these new conversations rarely challenge conventional wisdom. There is still a great thirst for scapegoats and a lingering adherence to the stabbed-in-the-back theory. Some new facets have emerged nevertheless: the rehabilitation of the army, for example. The unedifying image of unshod stragglers is rapidly being replaced by the tableau on Rezang La. Even the old Lee Enfield 303 rifle, once mocked as a disastrously obsolete weapon, is now displayed honorably. The landscape of the war zone, especially Ladakh, has been repackaged with the aid of Bollywood. The surreal beauty of Pangong Tso, the lake where the ceasefire took hold, is now known to Indian tourists, thanks to films like *Three Idiots* (which ends on the lakeshore for no reason at all). I’ve been there myself: it really is very nice.



As the old war has been popularized by (and for) a new public, some conclusions have actually become inadmissible. There is a reluctance, for instance, consider the likelihood that the Indian debacle in the war was produced not by Nehru or General Kaul or Ambassador John Kenneth Galbraith or even Defence Minister Krishna Menon, but by the immaturity of political, bureaucratic and military establishments that were only fifteen years removed from independence, utterly inexperienced, and clueless about the organizational requirements of a major war. The Chinese, on the other hand, had fought a long war against Japan, a civil war, and a war against the United States in Korea; the PRC was in that sense a highly militarized state. Conferring the 'Field Marshall' rank on an Indian general or two does not make good that immense imbalance of competence, although it does, of course, satisfy certain other hungers of the colonized. Nehru came close to admitting the problem when he mumbled that 'we' – a very ambiguous pronoun – had been 'somewhat amateurish,' but nobody wants to unpack that with undue care. It's too shameful, and it threatens to overflow a few bad men into the inadequate modernity of the larger society.

My point is that the recent focus on Rezang La as an event and an image is not only part of a make-over of the 1962 war, but a reactionary make-over of Indian nationhood: a modern nation of image-consumers, a nation stabbed in the back by incompetent politicians and inscrutable

Chinese, a nation of back-stabbed heroes in recognizably heroic tableaux, a nation where citizens are also soldiers and soldiers are citizens, a nation without paralyzing gaps between the state and the community. In this expanded national-public context, there is no easy fit for the photograph of Shastri at the Deoli detention camp. So certain kinds of questions are not asked: what possessed the Indian government to treat tens of thousands of Chinese-Indians as enemy aliens during the war, the place of race in Indian identity, the place of detention camps in Indian democracy, questions of acknowledgment, apology and reparation. It is not asked why Shastri was visiting a detention camp a year after the war, what he was smiling about, what the children were smiling about, and whether he and the children were chatting in Hindi or Chinese. (I assume it was the former, but photographs are mercifully silent about such awkward details.)

When war broke out in October of 1962, tens of thousands of civilians of Chinese ancestry were rounded up in India. The precise number is still unclear, but may emerge yet as historians ride the anniversary wave. Some were immigrants, some were Indian-born, some ran ‘ethnic businesses’ in Calcutta, others were well on their way to being absorbed into the ethnic mix of the Indian northeast. Many were deported to China, which could be a foreign country to them. Others went to camps like Deoli (near Kota, in Rajasthan), which had once been a site of inland penal transportation for Indians who had offended the Raj. Others were subjected to a humiliating regime of registrations, permits and police harassment. When people emerged from this bureaucratic no-man’s-land years later, they found that their homes and businesses had vanished into the opportunistic realm of ‘enemy property.’ There was never any apology or acknowledgment of wrong-doing, let alone reparations, from the government.

The Chinese-Indians were not charged with any offence, of course, since their offence – race – was clearly in evidence. Or was it? This is where the connections between race, ethnicity and citizenship begin to reveal their inherent irrationalities. Were the assimilated Chinese of Assam Chinese or Assamese? Could a policeman or a bureaucrat tell the difference without the help of foreign-sounding names and family histories? What about locally born children, who spoke the vernacular? If the Assamese of Chinese ancestry were enemy aliens on account of race, determined on the basis of *how they looked to others*, how safe were other Assamese? Are Bengalis, many of whom ‘look Assamese,’ more secure in their Indianness when they go along with the internment of people who ‘look Chinese’? If you follow this line of interrogation, you

would have to stand sheepishly beside the prime minister and say goodbye to Assam after all. You might also have an epiphany about the predicament of 'chinkies' from the northeast who work as waiters in Chinese restaurants in every Indian city: stand-in aliens, whose apparent fitness for the role inevitably erodes their status as Indians. The community and the state drift apart like icebergs, necessitating that Garhwali peasants be counted as stand-ins for the urban middle class.

There are several direct precedents for the Indian government's move to intern the 'Chinese' in 1962, the most direct of which is probably the colonial government's internment of Germans (including, ironically, Jews) during the Second World War. But the most obvious parallel is the Japanese experience in America in the 1940s, and it is useful to compare the two episodes briefly. Apart from the similar calculations of race and nationality, there is the shared matter of shame. In both situations, those who were rounded up for internment felt deeply ashamed, and in the process, seemed to liberate their captors from the need for shame. Not only had they been humiliated before their children, neighbors and compatriots, they had been violated by their own government in a manner that is analogous to rape within the family. Because there was no space left for speech, and no community left for conversation, it brought an extended silence that lasted, in America, until the emergence of the Nisei writers. In India, the silence has been more persistent, enforced – or at any rate, maintained – by a stifling consensus between the victims, the perpetrators and the larger community of citizens.

There are, I think, several reasons why. Firstly, the US won its war; India lost its. Thus, in the Indian situation, the shame of defeat in Ladakh and NEFA was compensated by the authority involved in the identification and internment of the Chinese in Calcutta and Gauhati. Without an actual victory to provide reassurance, there was no question of conceding the fraudulent victory ritual where *you* point the guns and *they* huddle behind barbed wire fences.

Secondly, the discourse of race is vastly different in India and the United States. The idea of multi-racial citizenship, which has taken hold (however precariously) in America since the 1960s has no real counterpart in India, where religion, rather than race, remains at the heart of

debates about insiders and outsiders. On race, among the classes that care about things like citizenship, there is a complacent agreement about what an Indian looks like, and the concept of a Chinese-Indian (or a Naga or Manipuri, for that matter) remains exotic. That agreement was cemented in the early twentieth century by social scientists like Benoy Sarkar, who took the concept of an 'Indian race' quite seriously (although Sarkar, with one eye on Muslims, preferred the term 'Hindu race'), and it has not been disturbed significantly by the inclusion of the northeastern states in the Republic. Sarkar – who was both an Indian nationalist and a cosmopolitan Asian – admired China, but it was axiomatic to him that chinkies were not Indians.

The third reason is an extension of the second. The range of public opinion in India is, in some contexts, much narrower than in the US. This is not to deny the obvious: there is a much stronger hegemonic agreement in America about what constitutes a 'normal' arrangement of power and wealth in society. The Indian political arena is far more diverse in its convictions and affiliations. But if we narrow the field to include only the 'proper citizens,' i.e., the recognizably modern public, the picture changes quite dramatically. There is, in the United States, an established and reasonably flourishing tradition of bourgeois dissent, directed not so much against the state as against the mainstream of discourse. The mainstream is depressingly racist and militarist; nevertheless, on any discussion of a 'contentious' issue – drone attacks, support for Israel, abortion, torture, detention without trial, nuclear policy, the death penalty – opposing opinions are ubiquitous, and the existence of a policy does not indicate the closure of debate. Indian public debate, in comparison, is severely attenuated by consensus, give or take Arundhati Roy. It is as if when it comes to the state, the Indian middle class is largely in agreement as to what is right and proper, and what is most right and proper is the identification of the state with the community. So what happened to the Chinese-Indians – who are racial outsiders to the community – is not especially troubling, because all the state has done is underline the proper boundaries of the community.

Because the state is also the major agent of violence in a modern society, this emaciation of public opinion, *in conjunction with the simultaneous widening of the imagined circle of racialized citizenship and its tightening to exclude certain others* ('we are all Kumaonis, but we are not chinkies'), is inevitably a moral problem. This brings me to the hanging of Ajmal Kasab.

Unlike most terror suspects who have attracted American attention since 2001, Kasab got a trial, with standard procedures of representation, evidence and conviction. He was not subjected to extraordinary laws or constitutional loopholes, or even tortured. In that regard, his treatment by the Indian state was quite exemplary. But already in the early stages of his captivity, there were troubling signs, such as the virulence with which public figures and even legal associations threatened the few lawyers who came forward to defend him. For all its propriety, Kasab's trial was always a hair's breadth removed from the respectable mob. Inevitably, irregularities crept in, climaxing in the bizarre secrecy and haste with which he was hanged, without being informed that he had one [further avenue of appeal](#). The government, battered by corruption scandals and a disintegrating coalition, needed the popularity of a popular execution.

The conviction and the death sentence were never in doubt, of course. The evidence was too overwhelming, and it contained irrefutable images: CCTV footage of Kasab with his black T-shirt and automatic rifle (not a Lee Enfield), firing into the crowd at the railway station.



Indian courts are much less trigger-happy than their American counterparts and the death penalty is indeed awarded quite rarely, but in Kasab's case it was probably a foregone conclusion. The man was a cold-blooded killer, and besides, the mob wanted it. In the process, quite a few questions did not get asked. Whose scapegoat was this peasant who – like other peasants – morphed into a national icon? What did he think he was doing? Was this village boy

with no education and no evident political beliefs, who was prone to giggling in the courtroom and throwing unpredictable little tantrums, mentally fit for capital punishment? Why should Kasab's death be celebrated even as Bal Thackeray's death was mourned, even though old Bal arguably terrorized more people over a much longer time, and did far greater damage to the rule of law in the country? Is hanging a terrorist really likely to deter men who commence their missions expecting to die? What issues are involved in *any* capital-punishment case: not only the legal and ethical issues of class, education, religion and process, but also the moral issues of error and irreversibility, and the brutality of keeping a man alive for four years like a pet and then suddenly murdering him like a sacrificial animal? These things simply do not exist in the mainstream of Indian public discourse, because civil society, in the process of expanding, has taken on the contours and qualities of the mob, which loudly asserts its identification with the state but is totally unconcerned with the discursive niceties of liberalism. Economic growth works in unexpected ways.

The mob took center stage after the execution, indulging in a frenzy of fireworks, cheering and handing out sweets. *The demon is dead, have a kalakand.* Anna Hazare, that great 'Gandhian,' expressed his regret that Kasab had not been hanged in public, so that the carnival of bloodlust and citizenship could have been more intense and unmediated. (In this, Hazare was quite close to the outright [fascists like Thackeray](#), who had complained about Kasab getting a trial at all.) Others, more somber but no less vulgar, held religious services for Kasab's victims. There was much public mourning of policemen and soldiers who had been killed in the Bombay incident, although the great majority of those who died were civilians. The 'public' element is central to the point that I am making. Noting the decline of public executions in early modern Europe, Foucault suggested that the unruly presence of the mob threatened to open up a gap between the state and the community that was unacceptable to the regime. That dynamic is, I think, reversed in episodes of fascism: the participation or even presence of the mob in state violence eliminates any gap that might otherwise exist. Those who were disturbed by the whole *tamasha* of Kasab's hanging were almost entirely marginal to this spontaneous enactment of the unity of state and community.

None of this is exotic. Celebrations and the rhetoric of 'closure for victims' families' are part and parcel of capital punishment in America. The word 'closure,' now being tossed about by

observers of Kasab's death, is borrowed directly from the American lexicon of psychotherapy and semi-public executions. And certainly the killing of bin Laden was greeted in America with a similar near-unanimous satisfaction. There is nevertheless a difference. Osama bin Laden was dealt with outside the legal structure. His death was an extralegal (even illegal) killing, and the public delight that followed was accordingly a kind of delinquent excess. The carnival and the justice system maintained a precarious separateness. This separateness has its own pathologies, but those are the pathologies of the state of exception. In Kasab's case, the regular process of governance – not a state of exception – merged with the carnival in a manner that was highly corrosive of liberal political culture, not to mention ghoulish. It came with its own photographic image: Kasab's corpse. The image of a dead twenty-five-year-old will, apparently, bring closure, bind the community and restore the outraged state. It was a depressing revelation of moral crudity at the center of the norm, and not just in the shadow of the norm.



This essay has gone on much longer than I had intended and is becoming a disaster, so I will bring it to a close. The spectacle of Kasab's execution was fundamentally shameless and indecent, nearly on the same scale as the shamelessness and indecency of Lal Bahadur Shastri – by all accounts a very decent man – posing with Chinese-Indian children in a detention camp, instead of closing the camp and apologizing. (Not even FDR, a man more heavily burdened by modern ideologies of race, posed with the Japanese in Manzanar.) But Shastri, having assumed

office soon after a lost war, was the leader of a shamed community. Feeling ashamed is, amazingly, highly compatible with being shameless. The shamed/shameless community wraps itself in the state. This is true even for the victims of the state: among the interned Japanese Americans, the No-No Boys (who rejected the overtures of military recruiters) were far outnumbered by those who joined the 442nd and 100th Regimental Combat Teams and fought for the very community that had declared them aliens. For the victimizers, of course, there is even less daylight between the self, the community and the state, because they too perceive themselves to be victims. (We were colonized, we were stabbed in the back, we lost the war.) I am reminded of a point Ronald Inden made years ago: communities that emerge from colonialism bury themselves in the state because the state represents not the community, but the political agency that was taken away by colonialism. That agency, institutionalized and reclaimed, becomes the basis for the new community of citizens.

But there is inevitably a heavy price to pay. This price is partly aesthetic: a matter of images. Sometimes the image is deceptive. What looks to be Chinese could be Assamese, or even Bengali. And the frozen tableau of Rezang La is, on the surface, quite beautiful. (Who says there's no tragedy in India? We're not savages.) But it is nevertheless a fake, bordering on kitsch. I am not saying that the battle fought at Rezang La in November 1962 was a fake, or that the soldiers (Indian and Chinese) who died were not admirable, or that what the shepherd found in January was unreal. I am saying that the image of that battle, and the reproduction of what the shepherd saw, has become increasingly fraudulent, because it expands public awareness of the 1962 war only to cover up the truth of the image of Shastri and the interned children. And partly, the price is moral and political, establishing the normalcy of a political community that flirts constantly with fascism, because morbid-heroic imagery and carnivals of communal identity take up all the public space, placing certain kinds of discussion out of bounds.

November 24, 2012

Posted by [Satadru Sen](#) at [1:27 PM](#) [Links to this post](#)

The Art of Invisibility

Introductory remarks to panel on "Cinema and the National-Security State" (Representing South Asia on Film series of screenings and talks, Queens College, November 8, 2012)

Some of you might recall that immediately after the attack on the World Trade Center on September 11, the composer Karlheinz Stockhausen and the artist Damien Hirst both remarked that the attack was nothing less than a spectacular work of art. Stockhausen and Hirst were quickly condemned. Some of the condemnation seems justified, since the remarks came across as callous, to put it mildly. But it can also be pointed out that seeing art in disasters, crimes and atrocities is a very large part of our culture. If that sensibility did not exist, and if it did not enjoy a pretty broad public acceptance, the war movie as we know it would not exist. TV shows like *24* and *Homeland* would not exist.

The modern state, as George Orwell suggested sixty years ago, is inseparable from anxieties about security and fantasies of violence: images of mushroom clouds, images of cruise missiles being launched from warships. These anxieties and fantasies lend themselves extremely well to art. It is, I think, fair to say that without that art – the war movie, the TV show about terrorism, the photograph of the raising of the flag in Iwo Jima, the movie *about* that photograph – our culture and our state would both have to be reimagined. These are the aesthetics of citizenship, i.e., the prettiness or the majesty of the relationship between the individual and the state. Even the September 11 event, in spite of the criticism of Stockhausen and Hirst, was almost immediately treated as art, not just by avant-garde composers and provocative artists, but also by

photographers, illustrators and editors who looked for the most dramatic angles and the most moving montages, and by the citizens who found the images striking.

But the aesthetics of citizenship is not a simple structure, because citizenship is constituted by a series of power relationships or inequalities. Not only is the individual not equal to the state, not all individuals are equally unequal. Here, we can make a crude but useful generalization. Mainstream or popular art, like commercial cinema, either takes the side of the state over the individual when there is a conflict, or refuses to acknowledge that there is a conflict. In this vision, the state is the extension, the representative and the absorber of the individual. Through policemen, or soldiers, or CIA agents, it thinks, decides and acts. And that agency is not only legitimate, it has aesthetic substance, which enhances the legitimacy.

Then there is the art of how the state acts upon the individual. This can, of course, be characterized in various ways: resistance art, guerrilla art, non-commercial, non-mainstream, non-monumental, and so on. I think, however, that a more useful characterization is to see it as the art of impotence, or of passivity. This is not to say that it is art without agency: obviously, the act of making a film, *any* film, is a form of agency. But the kind of cinema that I am talking about, and that we are going to be looking at this evening, comes out of a particular ideological space within the modern state where agency is fraught with difficulties. I want to explain this very briefly with reference to the Italian philosopher Giorgio Agamben.

In two books that he wrote on either side of September 11, Agamben argued that at the heart of the modern, democratic state is a moral and constitutional black hole, which he called a state of exception. The state of exception is a situation in which what is abnormal – illegal, unethical, impermissible – becomes the norm, and the lines between legality and illegality become blurred. The constitution effectively suspends itself, at least in some contexts. You can think of it as a permanent state of emergency, in which the specifics of the emergency and the specifics of constitutionality are both forgotten. You can also think of it as a particular institution, such as a concentration camp or a CIA ‘black site,’ or a legal regime like the Patriot Act in America and the Prevention of Terrorism Act in India. The name of each of those laws, I want you to notice, is deliberately bland and blank, showing you nothing except complacency, anxiety and a

citizenship that calls for its own renunciation. It functions very much like a generic image of a waving flag, or a burning skyscraper against a hard blue sky. It's a rhetorical technique that Norman Mailer called 'Bureaucratic Technologese': an inscrutable, vanilla language that makes the violence of the state invisible.

For the person caught in a state of exception, Agamben suggests a name: Homo Sacer, which translates roughly as 'bare man,' or 'empty man.' Homo Sacer is a person, or a demographic, that has absolutely no rights. He is included in the body politic by virtue of being excluded. His place in the law is that he has no legal status. He cannot be killed through the legal or constitutional process, but he can nevertheless be killed at any time, by anyone, without it constituting murder.

The most obvious example of modern Homo Sacer in a state of exception, Agamben suggested, was the Jew in Nazi Germany. But his point is that we do not need such dramatic examples for the model to work. In any case, extreme examples can be misleading, because they suggest that the problem is far away and rare, when in fact it is ubiquitous. The commonest Homo Sacer, Agamben wrote, are the inmates of detention camps for illegal immigrants, asylum seekers and refugees, which can be as small as a cell tucked away in a corner of an international airport, or as large as the French facility at Sangatte, which was closed down a few years ago. It can be as remote as Guantanamo and Bagram, and as nearby as New York City itself.

These camps are not prisons, Agamben reminded us. This is a crucial distinction in the history of the modern world. Michel Foucault argued, back in the 1970s, that the prison is the defining institution and metaphor of modern society. But Agamben argued that the detention camp has surpassed the prison in its utility as a model. Prisoners have rights, they have access to lawyers and appeals, they have an existence in the public record, they have been through a constitutional process of trial and conviction, and their sentences are definite (although this is changing in the era of sex-offender registries and similar systems of information-based control and permanent probation). Camp inmates do not have those things. The detention camp is a place with rules but no rights, and it exists within a constitutional state but the constitution does not exist within it. These dynamics make it the perfect example of a state of exception.

After September 11, America acquired a more or less new archipelago of states of exception, and a new population of Homo Sacer. These are for the most part Muslims, although non-Muslims have not been immune. They are mostly non-citizens: immigrants, foreign students, people on work visas, people who have been kidnapped overseas by the military or the CIA. But they also include US citizens, and the citizens of countries that are allied to the United States. They include scientists, office managers, and people who looked suspicious to a flight attendant or a fellow passenger on a plane. These are people who are included in America by virtue of their exclusion from the constitutional protections of citizenship, and simultaneously, by their subjection to the power of the state.

It is not surprising that South Asians have been at the very heart of this particular state of exception. This is not only because of the American military adventures in Afghanistan and Pakistan, but also because of the large population of South Asian Muslims in America, and because even those that are not Muslim seem to fit the profile. (It is, I think, a remarkable phenomenon that the image of the 'terrorist' in America has shifted eastwards from the Arab in the 1980s, to the Pakistani and even the Bangladeshi in the present day.)

The documentary films that we are showing you today reflect the experiences of these South Asians, and they were made by a group of artists and activists, the Visible Collective, that includes quite a few South Asians. In that double sense, they are the art of passivity as well as of agency: art that comes from the intersection between a metaphorical detention camp that captures us all, and the actual camp that captures some but not others. The film-makers may disagree with that characterization, but I'll leave it to Uzma Rizvi (of the Pratt Institute) and Prerana Reddy (of the Queens Museum of Art) to address that issue, if they choose.

I want to make a couple of quick points first, before I shut up. One has to do with the South Asian diaspora in America. And this point is that there is really no such thing as *the* South Asian diaspora. There are many South Asian diasporas. They are separate by class, by education, by country of origin, by language, by religion, and very importantly, by legal status. By the terms of

my analysis, they can be divided into two broad groups: the visible and the invisible. The visible are people like me, and like Uzma and Prerana. We have some money, some social status, American passports, command of the English language, acid tongues, colleagues who can and will stand up for us when the acidity gets us into trouble.

The invisible are the cab drivers and waiters, who typically remain unseen by us even when they are in plain sight. They see themselves, of course, but their sight is unconnected to the political power that makes the difference between rules and rights. If they were to earnestly declare at the airport, 'My name is Khan and I am not a terrorist,' nobody would understand their accent and the consequences would be unpleasant. So they remain invisible when they are secretly approached and intimidated by the NYPD or the FBI, and when they disappear into a detention site without a charge or a trial, not knowing when they will reemerge, and under what conditions. What the visible group sometimes attempts to do, as Visible Collective has tried to do, is recover these people from invisibility, even if it is for the seven or eight minutes of a short film. The short film format is particularly appropriate, I think, because it constitutes an aesthetic of anti-monumentality, doing without grand spectacles, slow-motion video montages, and even pretty pictures. The stripped-down starkness that we see in these films is the aesthetic of Homo Sacer, glimpsed from the perimeter of the camp.

My other point – the last one, I promise – is that the visible people, the ones who are not in the camp, are in fact within the orbit of the camp. Sometimes even Imran Khan and Shah Rukh Khan must explain that they are not terrorists. The state of exception is not just a concrete box or a razor-wire fence for people without passports and credit cards. The camp, as I said before, is also a metaphor: a fate that can befall anyone, including citizens and film-makers and the visible, including people who are not South Asian or Muslim, or even brown. The shadow of Homo Sacer – the predicament of being excluded from citizenship – falls on all citizens of the modern state.

As promised, I will now shut up. We will be showing you four short films, imbedded in the talks by Uzma and Prenana. Following that we can have a discussion with the audience.

The films shown are:

FEAR OF FLYING: <http://vimeo.com/24910890>

LINGERING TWENTY: <http://vimeo.com/39513929>

INVISIBLE MAN: <http://vimeo.com/39473380>

PATRIOT STORY: <http://vimeo.com/39450303>

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Falling Behind - Durgapur, New York

A year has now gone by since my daughter was born. It is as good an excuse as any to take stock, since she is growing up in a place that I cannot stop regarding with extreme ambivalence. It is a place where strangers become familiar and family, inevitably, is a little strange. So this will be a little essay about immigration and procreation, and about children and parents in provincial towns and the world city.

Of the various cities where I have lived, New York is not the ugliest. It comes close, but there are saving graces like Prospect Park and the view of the sunset from my rooftop. The climate is miserable for half the year, and the nearest wilderness is the state of New Jersey: there is no desert, no mountains. But fall is wonderful and even the summer has its sweaty pleasures, like endless evenings of ice clinking in a glass while a breeze comes in off the Hudson. The people suck very badly. Not only do they resemble an assortment of raccoons and possums, they are sullen, abrasive and unintelligent. (The check-out girls in the grocery stores are the best examples. Every encounter leaves me awestruck.) The native accents – by which I mean the Bugs Bunny speech of old Brooklynites, and the many variations on Rosie Perez that one hears in Queens – are particularly grating. Traffic is horrible; I can think of no silver lining there. New Yorkers are not only the worst drivers in America, it has never occurred to them that gridlock, rampant double-parking and lanes with no shoulders call for small vehicles, not SUVs. I would not willingly own a car in this city, and have long since fallen behind in my knowledge of cars. Cars are another life that doesn't matter anymore. (It amazes me that at one point in my life, back when I was a Californian, I knew the number of g-forces that any new car could sustain when cornering, and planned life accordingly.)

But my corner of Brooklyn – Greenwood Heights, now rapidly being absorbed into Park Slope – is also the closest thing to a neighborhood that I have known in thirty years. On the ten-minute walk from my home to the gym, I can count on being greeted by at least five neighbors: first, the motorcycle enthusiast sitting in his garage fondling his latest acquisition, then the legless man on his porch just around the corner, then the Algerian brothers hanging out in the doorway of their shop, then the homeless guy in the park (who has survived, against all odds, through

winter after winter), then the old lady with the sweet-faced beagle at the corner of 7th and Windsor. If I walk in the other direction towards the bars on 5th Avenue or the cafes on 6th, I walk past two friendly off-duty bartenders before I have gone three blocks. (Alas, I know their names, and they know me.)

Coming to New York was the climax of a long expansion. Durgapur, the city where I lived until I was fourteen, was in some ways an Indian version of Mayberry (or an Americanized Malgudi), albeit with three hundred thousand people. People knew each other, it was impossible to get lost without being quickly found and returned to your owner, and children lived in cocoons of total safety and familiarity. Neighborhoods – a series of orderly company townships – were absolutely stable: nobody moved away unless somebody died, nobody thought seriously about changing jobs. Our mothers had known our friends since the latter were babies and continued to be feared by the ex-babies. To misappropriate a German word, our world was relentlessly *gemütlich*: cozy. The fathers all worked for the organizations that went into the alphabet soup of Indian industry: DSP, ASP, DVC, AVB, CMERI, DPL, DTPS, FCI, PCBL, MAMC. They came from similar middle-class, engineering backgrounds. There was no great wealth or poverty. Within a limited range of variations, their salaries were similar: enough for comfortable lives of modest desires in an economy that prioritized steel plants and research laboratories over TV sets. We had a car, but it was twenty years old. Nobody that I knew had a new one. It was all distinctly Indian and quite novel. Our parents came from all over the India and spoke many different languages, but the children all spoke a relaxed mix of English, Hindi and Bengali. The older ones knew some Punjabi obscenities, and it left us with the idea that Punjabi is fundamentally obscene.

There was never any question in anybody's mind that the shape of our lives was temporary. Durgapur was a place of transience, where one grew up and then left: a cocoon for Nehru's fantastic awake-at-midnight butterflies, dusted with industrial pollution. The Mayberry-ness of it was deceptive, but it was romantic all the same. Nehru aside, our cultural-historical parents were the American New Dealers: the men who dreamed up the Tennessee Valley Authority (that inspired the Damodar Valley Corporation, which, along with steel, was the bedrock of Durgapur), and Joseph Allen Stein, the socialist architect who fell in love with Nehru and became an improvised Indian. Stein was a Midwesterner, a San Franciscan and a New Yorker

who went east in 1952, looking for a frontier. How can I not be fond of him? His footprints are not famous buildings in New York City, but the Steel Township in Durgapur, and subsequently, the India International Centre and Habitat Centre in New Delhi. We walked in those footprints. Our parents were not fanatics but they were not cynics either: they took nation-building seriously. It was the same in the other sooty cities that came up in twentieth-century India: Rourkela, Bhilai, Bokaro, Jamshedpur, Chittaranjan, Chandigarh. Emblems of the nation of science and socialism, we were simultaneously cosmopolitan and insular: startling novelty, sleepily going nowhere. One would have to look at the Soviet Union to find another example of this kind of urbanity.

It is, of course, possible and even likely that these places never existed. There can be no doubt that the classless world of engineers was an elaborate fantasy, in which the underclass was only better hidden, more effectively tucked away, than in older Indian cities. And no doubt our parents lived with anxieties and terrors that belied their modest-but-comfortable salaries, and of which the children were only dimly aware, if at all. Later on, in the final stages, there were whispers of broken marriages and drug addiction. Whenever I have returned to Durgapur, I have wanted to run away as fast as possible: appalled by the sprawl, depressed by the overwhelming shabbiness, disconcerted by the gap – and also the proximity – between what I remembered and what I was seeing. Yet, objectively, the place is bigger, richer, more thriving now than ever before. There are shopping malls and multiplexes. I have never been able to decide whether the apparent shabbiness is a real consequence of congestion and decay, the eating away of the city's remaining open spaces, or merely in my head: the shock of confronting childhood retrospectively. A bit of both, probably.

When people who begin in such places end up in New York, it is the closing of a circle. It surprises me to realize that some of the kids I had known in kindergarten, or in the fifth grade, in that dusty nowhereland are now on the other side of the planet but still on the same side as me, a short subway ride away. We can face each other over a beer in lower Manhattan, almost overwhelmed by this circle-closing business. 'I remember this banker from when we were nine years old in a town where our parents were pioneers. Almost everyone that I knew, he knew also.' But more than that there is a sense of inevitability about it. The expanded world – the process of growing up cosmopolitan – has collapsed back upon itself. Once again, I am a non-

driver. Once again, the comfort zone of everyday life is an intimate circle of neighborhood parks and rooftops, living-room sofa and local pub, uncles and aunties who never seem to move a yard. But that restless old desire to get out, to find someplace bigger, to seek out strangers, has more or less gone away. There is no place to live that is bigger and more filled with strangers than New York City. If Durgapur was a place to grow up, New York is a place where one can die, more or less content.

For that reason, parallels between growing up in a Nehruvian backwater and growing up in New York can only be metaphorical: the bad poetry of middle-aged nostalgia. Falling behind is what is real, but so is the impossibility of going back. Here at the center of the world, Mira will acquire a kind of provinciality, barely suspecting the existence of margins – which are also lost centers – where children saw letters like CMERI and DVC as the natural building blocks of cities and lives. It will be very hard for her to imagine Stein standing on a dimly lit railway platform in the middle of the jungle, dreaming of socialist traffic circles.

And then there is the matter of language. What languages will Mira speak? English, of course, and perhaps some Spanish or French. Some German, if I can swing it. She will probably avoid the fate of talking like Bugs Bunny and, with a bit of luck, Rosie Perez. But it is unlikely that she will have more than a smattering of Bengali or Hindi. She will almost certainly never be proficient in literary Bengali, or appreciate the humor of the minefield where the literary meets the colloquial, or be able to tell the difference between *ghoti* and *bangal*. Nor will she have that marvelous ability to improvise continuously and switch in mid-sentence, without effort or deliberation, between Bengali, English and Urdu.

Who has fallen behind here? Who will have lost something? Not Mira – just the father. The children of immigrants ‘lose’ their parents’ languages, but because the languages are not their own, they miss nothing. There is, at most, a mild regret that can be made good in college. Even parents don’t feel the loss equally or predictably. There is no shortage of middle-class Indian immigrants in America who speak to their children only in English, as if the little buggers might not learn English otherwise. This is understandable when the parents come from different

Indian states and English is their shared language, but when we are talking about two Bengali parents, or two Hindi-speaking parents, I find it almost inexplicable, and I must admit, perverse. The only explanation that comes to mind is that language, as a source of self-hood, is not especially important to these people.

If that is granted, then a certain logic becomes discernible. Among Indians who become NRIs (the fabled Non-Resident Indian, which is not just a signifier of ethnicity-in-emigration but a middle- and upper-class condition to be found exclusively in high-value destinations like North America, Britain and Australia), language comes loose from identity even without emigration. It is quite common to find children in India who call their parents ‘Mom’ and ‘Dad’ (or even ‘Pop’). The phenomenon is particularly widespread in the Hindi belt of northern India, where words like ‘Pitaji,’ ‘Abba’ and even ‘Ma’ have been consigned to obsolescence. This is not entirely new: two generations ago there was ‘Mummy’ and ‘Daddy.’ But it is not entirely old either. Mummy and Daddy have seeped downwards from the elites of society to the aspirational middle class, i.e., to people who used to say ‘Amma’ and ‘Abba.’ Our parents spoke to us in Bengali, or Tamil, or Kannada, albeit sprinkled with English words and phrases. Yet on every trip to India, in shops and restaurants, I encounter perfectly ordinary families in which parents routinely speak to their young children in English. When these classes reproduce in North America, they see no reason to do things differently. My point is that they are simply continuing to be Indian, not being overly American. And since this is an Indian norm, I cannot deny that I have fallen behind.

Why this Mom-and-Pop nonsense should be more prevalent in the Hindi belt than, say, in Bengal or Tamil Nadu, I do not know. It could be that in spite of years of huffing and puffing on the part of the chauvinists of the *rashtrabhasha*, Hindi never made the grade as a source of cultural prestige. But it is probably true that for people who grow up at ‘home,’ so to speak, identity is assured in so many ways that particular ways – like the notion of a mother-tongue – become dispensable.

For people who leave 'home' in the formative moment of adolescence – children whose sense of home is disrupted by emigration – language is absolutely and obsessively vital. In North America and Britain, it is an escape, an armor and a weapon in a daily race war. And like houses and cities that were abandoned before they were fully discovered, language becomes both dreamlike and very real: something to revisit constantly, to re-explore, to reinvent. These explorations produce the stuff of who we are: neither quite like the children with whom we went to kindergarten, nor exactly like the grown-ups amongst whom we live.

Mira will not be entirely free of these concerns. Already the color of her skin is a topic of conversation: my relatives mutter about how light she is, people on her mother's side mutter about how dark. But in New York City, where light brown is the norm, nobody will bat an eye. Departure and arrival – something as mundane as a walk through an airport – will not be fraught with issues of loss, acquisition, and the suspect nature of memory and reality. Nobody – except I – will care whether she speaks Bengali or not, whether she has access to the houses and cities of her father's youth. And it is my caring that gives the game away: I am slightly behind the times, and the lag gets longer with every passing year. Introducing Indian movies at the ongoing film festival at my college, I am less sure of myself, more out of my depth, the closer the films get to the present time. (Not a good predicament for a historian, I admit.) I find A.R. Rehman's music highly overrated. I am bored by the present generation of Indian cricketers, and the prevalence of corporate-speak in Indian culture – the casual use of words like 'brand' and 'equity' – makes my skin crawl.

Let me summon up some literary support for what I am trying to say. In *The Satanic Verses*, Salman Rushdie outlined a distinction between immigrants and exiles. Immigrants are both transformational and transformed by movement, Rushdie suggested. Exiles are fossils and madmen, clinging – often violently – to what they imagine to be the changeless universe of the homes they have left but not abandoned. Rushdie left little doubt about which type he preferred, and I agree with him. But what makes *The Satanic Verses* a great novel, I think, is the implication that immigrants are transformed in ways that are misaligned with where they are, as well as with where they once were. Their destinations are always slippery and insufficiently acquired, they fall behind the cities that may never have existed, they fall behind their own children, and the struggle to keep up is exhausting and futile. My daughter will be not be 'like'

me any more than I am 'like' my former or present countrymen. As soon as we are past the baby-talk, language will prove to be as much a chasm as it can be a bridge, unable to communicate the essential melancholy of the half-remembered smell of burning leaves on an autumn afternoon, or the echoing sound of a playing field in the twilight. But she has begun to call me Baba, and that is something.

October 20, 2012

Posted by [Satadru Sen](#) at 8:53 PM

Hitler in India

The fashion potential of the Nazis has been undeniable from the outset. Hugo Boss knew it, Goebbels and Leni Riefenstahl recognized it, and glamorous Englishmen from David Bowie to the current princelings have shown their appreciation. Americans have been resistant (except in prison wards and Idaho), but recently in India, in Ahmedabad of all places, a [shiny new store](#) named after Adolf opened its doors, the 'i' in the 'Hitler' dotted cleverly with a small swastika. (It cannot be pretended that this is the innocent Hindu swastika, although that cover can of course be utilized if necessary.) Hitler does not sell storm-trooper uniforms, jackboots or even armbands. It sells run-of-the-mill menswear to well-heeled men in the 'best governed state in India.' (A brown shirt or two can probably be found on the racks.) Nevertheless, Ahmedabad's tiny Jewish community has protested, reporters have shown up with cameras, the Israeli embassy in Delhi has made some very mild unhappy noises, and the proprietor has issued a decidedly unapologetic defense.

What the gentleman said boils down to this: only a few Jews are complaining, 'the Hindu majority' doesn't seem to have a problem (so what's your beef?), and besides, Hitler wasn't all

that bad. He was being a bit brazen, no doubt, but not all that unusual in the middle-class Indian context, where a casual fondness for the Führer has long been evident. 'I have read his autobiography and agree with a lot of what he wrote,' declared another businessman-admirer recently. *Mein Kampf* is sold openly in sidewalk bookstalls all over India, and it's certainly possible – although unlikely – that the man, carried away by his fascination with interwar German angst, actually read the whole thing in its tedious entirety. A German friend who teaches Indian history is regularly confronted, during visits to India, by people who declare their admiration of Hitler and congratulate him on his good fortune at being the great man's compatriot. My friend is married to a woman with an Indian parent, has blond children with Indian names, and lives in kick-out-the-black-sheep Switzerland, so he has enough on his plate without being asked to raise his arm in Aryan solidarity. He is more polite than I would be in his shoes. Taking umbrage and responding with 'Sala, fuck you,' would be unbecoming of a research scholar in a foreign country, and like most other Germans, he makes an earnest attempt to explain that Hitler was a bad guy.

But is that explanation really necessary? The answer, in the Indian case, is yes and no. That Hitler killed a lot of people is known to Indians who know his name. But the details, the context and the history are typically a blank. Moreover, it is known (as Justice Radhabinod Pal noted in his dissent at the Tokyo war crimes trials) that history and its judgments are the discourses of victors. And since the victors in this case are also the colonial powers from whose grasp modern India emerged, the history that declares Hitler to be a bad guy is automatically suspect, something to defy along with tut-tutting foreign reporters. What become more vital are Hitler's credentials as an enemy of Britain, which in the absence of credible history are easily construed as a kind of anti-colonialism. Indian nationalism, like many other anti-colonial nationalist movements (including, ironically, the Zionist) flirted more or less openly with Germany and Japan during the war, and that rationale – with its mixture of delusion and canny opportunism – remains alive.

Beyond that, however, the substance of Indian Hitlerphilia becomes unreliable and thin. The ideological foundations are either missing or very different. There is no recognizable anti-Semitism in India; most Indians couldn't care less about Jews one way or the other. They neither hate them nor feel guilty about them. They usually don't know any personally either,

since there are about five thousand Jews in all of India, give or take a 'lost tribe' in Mizoram. Indians think about Jews as often as they do about Kung 'bushmen' in the Kalahari. There is nothing strange in this: how many Americans, or Germans for that matter, spend time thinking about the Kung or the Herero, or even about Europe's own Roma and Sinti? There is nothing automatic or natural about the status of history's victims: it must be achieved politically. The notion that anti-Semitism is a 'universal' problem that everybody should prioritize merely reflects a larger hegemony. Anti-Semitism is Europe's misfortune: a problem within a specific arrangement of culture, religion and race.

It can be argued that everybody *should* know about the Holocaust, or that one should not have to be a Jew or a Gypsy to recoil from mass murderers, but mass murder is so ubiquitous in the history of the modern world that there is no space in a 'world history' textbook to include every episode, and to reject all the murderers on principle would be to call into question the organization of the world itself. Even Gandhi, who was ready to ask such questions, and who counted Jews among his most intimate partners, knew practically nothing about the Holocaust, which led him to make idiotic remarks about the Jewish predicament in wartime Europe. In the brief moment between the end of the war and his death, with political disaster and mass killing creeping over India, Gandhi could hardly be expected to pay much attention to a European catastrophe, yet he could not ignore it either. In such circumstances, parochialism, ignorance and stupidity become normative responses to 'world history.' It is more embarrassing for people in the 'Third World' than it is for Europeans and Americans, because whereas the latter are not *expected* to know anything about Third World catastrophes and hence have no obligation to respond, the former cannot remain untouched by Western history and must improvise responses, especially if they are to count as modern and worldly.

The opening of the shop called Hitler reminded me of an incident on the cricket field a few years ago, when Indian fans in Baroda and then Bombay made monkey gestures at the black Australian player Andrew Symonds. It was disgraceful, and was justifiably condemned by Indians as well as Australians. I think, however, that there is room for debate on the specific condemnation, which was a charge of racism. As a form of spectator behavior, monkey gestures directed at black players are straight out of the copybook of European football, where racism is an ongoing problem, and which is now accessible on television to newly moneyed sports fans

even in a provincial city like Baroda. Given that African students are routinely abused and insulted on Indian college campuses, and that Indian immigrants in America have appalling views on *kallus*, it would certainly appear that racism of the European sort has established its Indian pedigree. This is, however, misleading. *Kallu*-phobic NRIs take their cues from the white-American mainstream; their sense of a 'bad school' or a 'bad neighborhood' is only half-baked when they first arrive at JFK or LAX. Anti-black racism, like anti-Semitism, requires discursive meat: it needs, in other words, a deep consensus about what race is, what blackness is, what a Jew is like, and so on. Those discourses are so threadbare and shallow in India that it becomes rather doubtful whether a monkey gesture in Baroda means what it would in Barcelona or Liverpool. (This is not to say that the effect on the target is less hurtful.)

What then does it mean? What might an Indian who has picked up a copy of *Mein Kampf* mean when he says that he agrees with Hitler, assuming he is being sincere and not merely provocative? He means, presumably, that he empathizes with what he perceives to be a desire for order and a stifled nationalism: the Romantic notion of a community defined not only by its humiliation by outsiders but also by its failure to *be* a community united in purpose, yearning for unity, purity, revenge and fulfillment. What is peculiar about the Nazis is not the fact of mass murder, but the extent to which they imbued murder with the magic of industrial-bureaucratic efficiency. That magic is largely alien to India: it is desired in a general way by the middle class, but resisted in its particulars by nearly everybody, including the middle class. Indian admiration for Hitler is, in that sense, an 'innocent' empathy, or the misidentification of one set of frustrations with another. Likewise, the behavior of the monkeys in Baroda and Bombay was a kind of innocent pleasure: that of being a crowd in the winter sunshine, having a bit of fun at the expense of a total outsider who was just passing through anyway. The members of the crowd knew that they were being hurtful, but had only the vaguest idea of the historical context and political significance of the pain, and hence, of the scale of the offence.

As an insider of sorts in America, I do not – cannot – use the word 'innocence' innocently. I recall Hugh Richmond saying years ago, in a class on Shakespeare, that innocence is the highly destructive conviction that your own ignorance, honesty and good intentions (or at least the absence of malice) will have good consequences. (Richmond is an Englishman, and several students were outraged by his cynicism. Graham Greene had their ilk in mind when he wrote

The Quiet American.) Modern Indian society is hardly innocent of racism, but the races at the heart of this racism have been local: Dalits, Adivasis, northeasterners, Muslims, and so on. When it comes to them, there can be no claim to innocence. When it comes to the victims of Western racism, however, Indian malice can be as innocent as American benevolence, although less deadly. It is, to some extent, a matter of aping a Western norm of desire and display that is *represented* by Hitler and football hooligans. More than that, however, it is the *utilization* of Western symbols – Hitler, football hooligans – to assert a modernity that is substantially autonomous of the West. When European and American news readers are startled by a boutique named Hitler, or a politician's son named Stalin Karunanidhi, or a restaurant in Japan with a concentration camp theme and swastikas on the dinner plates, much of the shock comes from the recognition of this autonomy.

It would be a mistake to assume that because the autonomous use of Hitler in Asia is counter-hegemonic and innocent, it is harmless. This is not merely or even largely because it offends the local Jews. It is because when a businessman in Gujarat cites the feelings (or rather, indifference) of the Hindu majority, he is *not* talking about the impertinence of Jews. He is talking about Muslims, who have a long and deep discursive history as the 'misfortune' of the Indian nation. When another Indian 'agrees' with *Mein Kampf*, he is not expressing an opinion on Anglo-French perfidy or trying belatedly to join the NSDAP, but indicating his sympathy for a vision of Indian nationhood that privileges perceptions of victimhood, sabotage and resurgence, and devalues the rights of individuals, dissidents and internal minorities. Who needs France when you have Pakistan? Pakistan is not just a country, but also an *Indian* state of mind: the historical misfortune that is as much within as without the nation. This nationhood, with its fantastic/innocent visions of Hitler and Stalin, is of course fundamentally hybrid in its parentage; it could hardly be otherwise. But it is more dangerous to Indians than it is to foreigners.

September 2, 2012

Note: Since I wrote this piece, the owner of the shop in Ahmedabad has [decided to change the name](#) of his business. May I suggest 'Arthur Harris' as the new name? The initials would remain the same and nobody would complain, although business might suffer from public apathy. Alternately, he could call it 'Modi.' Catchy, ethnic, popular.

Posted by [Satadru Sen](#) at [11:19 AM](#) [Links to this post](#)

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An Olympic Scatology

Writing about the recently concluded Olympic Games in London, Uri Avnery made an observation that should be familiar to Indians. Israeli athletes don't win many medals in international competitions. But when they do, the Israeli press goes a little nuts, immediately claiming the victory and the medal 'for the Jewish people.' The typically large Indian contingent in London (some eighty-odd men and women) managed, quite atypically, to pick up a half-dozen medals. There were no golds, and it was by almost any measure another stupendous display of underachievement. Nevertheless, it was the most medals that any Indian Olympic squad has ever won, and each person who picked up a silver or bronze was declared by the Indian media to have 'brought glory to the nation.' Politicians fell over themselves to congratulate them (headlines along the lines of 'Chief Minister fellates wrestler' became common) and give them millions of tax-payer rupees that are denied to schools and hospitals. (Recently, a five-day-old baby died in an Indian hospital under circumstances that would make Ayn Rand sit up in hell: when the parents could not pay a 200-rupee bill, the hospital removed the infant from the ICU. So it goes.)

An Olympic bronze is nothing to scoff at, of course, and the athletes who won those medals – and even those who failed to win – deserve nothing less than admiration. What is disturbing is the 'glory to the nation' business: not only the swallowing of the individual by the mob, but also

the assumption that a bronze (or gold, for that matter) *can* bring ‘glory’ to a nation. Glory, by definition, requires a certain amount of basking. To bask effectively, you need admiring others. So when a bronze brings ‘glory to the nation,’ there must be a presumption that the rest of the world, or at least a significant part of it, is looking on admiringly. The level of deluded narcissism is amusing at best, but mostly it’s pathetic. Nobody else cares, bhai. Get over it.

It is no doubt true that this tendency towards overreaction has to do with the rarity of medals and victories. When you finally get one, you celebrate a little too much, like a drunk after a successful game of darts at the bar (or Virat Kohli after a Test century). The US typically wins a lot of medals at the Olympics, so there is no great jumping up and down after any one medal, give or take a ‘miracle on ice’ against the Soviet Union. (An absurd *tamasha* of national glory if there ever was one, typically American in its over-the-top sentimentality.)

But the key issue is not just the ‘glory,’ but the ‘national.’ Middle-class Indians have a nasty habit of turning every success into a case for national glory. Not just wrestlers and boxers, but beauty queens, film-makers, economists and chemistry professors become the gymnasts of the nation. We are like that only, we claim you, a simpering Shekhar Gupta told a nervously giggling Manoj ‘Night’ Shyamalan some years ago. (That was back when ‘Night’ – who imagines himself to be an American Indian, not to mention an Indian-American – was being feted by Newsweek as the next Spielberg. No nation that takes its glory seriously would approach him anymore.) Those who resist, like the Nobel laureate Venkatraman Ramakrishnan, are treated with consternation, as if their discomfort with the national embrace is a sign of moral depravity.

What brings on this bizarre breaking of nationalist wind? The reasons must vary quite a lot from nation to nation. In the Israeli case, it might be the neurosis of a small country that thrives on imagining itself as permanently beleaguered: its public discourse seeks to fortify the morale of the laager on the one hand, and on the other, reach out to a wider ‘Jewish people.’ The laager is simultaneously affirmed and denied. In the American case, looking to ‘Team USA’ as a source of glory is actually the exception, not the norm, where sport is concerned. (Thank God for that. The sight of right hands pressed reverently to athletic bosoms in roaring stadiums is bad enough: a

cross between a prayer and a Nazi salute.) Besides, the US goes to war – the real thing, as Avnery points out – so frequently that sport is generally not required for national glory.

In the Indian case, we have the usual tangle of motives. The rhetoric of ‘Team India’ (first applied to cricket, naturally) is a direct imitation of ‘Team USA.’ (Now, just as amusingly, the Brits have followed suit and given us ‘Team GB.’ Not even Mrs. Thatcher thought of that one.) But unlike Team USA, Team India is tasked quite seriously with national glory, which means being *like* the US in its structures and symbols. Having a ‘Team India’ is, in other words, itself glorious: a whiff of relevance, glamor, America. It is the rhetoric of power that, in the ideal outcome, combines with the oxygen of victory. When Abhinav Bindra won a gold medal in shooting four years ago in Beijing, the national hoopla had nothing to do with any appreciation of target-shooting. It was about the gold and the impoverished tribe: we have a winner. Likewise, when the altogether inspiring Mary Kom wins a boxing bronze in London, what matters most is not her skill and courage, or the fact that she comes from a humble background in a marginal state, has two kids, and was fighting in a higher-than-usual weight class, but the sense that she has added to the national wealth. We have a winner, sort of.

Not every nation that is not America reacts like this to international competition; neither do all Indians. It is, predictably, the middle class that displays its insecurities so nakedly. It might be argued that what fuels this insecurity is not an excess of numbers (like a billion-plus population) as a paucity of numbers: i.e., the fact that the class that is most ardently nationalistic, the most infatuated with international completion, is outnumbered in its own country by people who don’t care all that much about these things. Its cultural space is constantly encroached upon by the great unwashed, who also sit in Parliament, show up in the same political demonstrations on the Ram Lila grounds, make their own claims to being the face of the nation, and worst of all, *contaminate* those who would otherwise be glorious. The latter must therefore underline its distinct modernity by declaring its love of ‘Team India’ or ‘Force India’ or whatever.

This internal insecurity breeds insecurity on the world stage. The obsession with ‘national glory’ through Nobel prizes and Olympic medals is actually closely tied to babies dying in hospitals

because their laborer parents could not pay two hundred rupees. Middle-class Indian patriots are quite aware that such things don't happen in 'winner' countries, and that their inability to prevent it in their own country is utterly inglorious. It reduces them to the level of the impotent and devastated laborers, who are their compatriots, after all. Victories and medals are needed in compensation. Abhinav Bindra's air gun (which could be considered slightly comic, like air guitar and air kisses) becomes something more lethal and important.

We are talking, therefore, of a particular form of *ressentiment*, or the nationalism of existential envy. Normatively (if we concede without a struggle that Europe is the norm), *ressentiment* nationalism had to do with a sense of having been 'done in' by foreigners and aliens: the French, the British, Jews, Muslims, cosmopolitans, communists. They screwed us over, so we are behind them in the number of battleships and natives we command: self-assertion and self-fulfillment are inseparable from revenge and victory. That sense of thwarted glory generated the hunger for a place in the sun, whether that place was on the victory stand, the battlefield or the map. In India, the greater fear and hatred are directed against the Self that has disgraced itself. By being Team India, by winning medals on the international stage, we appear in our own eyes to conquer and transcend ourselves.

This is also a problem of liberalism, which is why the phenomenon doesn't materialize in every country where hospitals throw poor babies out of Intensive Care. No doubt there are other such lands, but the political culture of those countries was not magically impregnated by Mill, Gokhale, Nehru and Ambedkar. In India, where the pregnant lady (Mother India, naturally, who is accustomed to multiple/ambiguous fathers) actually gave birth to the uncertainly wanted child, the frustrations of liberal nationhood inevitably take the form of an increasingly strident insistence upon the supreme importance of the national community and state. Nehru stumbles and loses his way; Bose and Savarkar step forward, saluting breathlessly under a ton of marigold.

It is not a pretty sight. The statue of Bose on the seafront in Port Blair can take one's breath away simply by being grotesque: Billy Bunter meets Mussolini, stabbing the air with his finger

like John Travolta in *Saturday Night Fever*. There is, it would seem, no other way to be: not only no other way to be a community, but also no other way to be a person. The individual embarrassed by his failure as a liberal citizen must seek his dignity – and, impossibly, his individuality – by burrowing deeper into the bowels of the national collective, producing a rampantly illiberal nationhood. Exhausted by the attempt to distinguish himself from those who apparently place no value on individuality, he seeks to redeem *everybody* – the indifferent, the reluctant, the peasant, the wrestler – by stuffing them within the national body. A badminton player wins a bronze when her opponent pulls a muscle and defaults, and – Jai ho! – brings glory to the nation. (No fault of Saina Nehwal: a wonderful athlete.) Meanwhile in Calcutta, Mamata Banerjee taps into glory by turning Independence Day into an occasion for a police parade on Red Road, giving the cops a break from arresting her critics. If the thought of the Calcutta Police marching past with their pot bellies and Lee Enfield rifles is funny, the immediate model – the Republic Day parade on Janpath, with its combination of missiles and ‘culture’ – is hardly more edifying. The search for national glory is never too far removed from farce.

Ressentiment and a place in the sun, medals and national redemption, parades and salutes! I write this rambling mess sitting in Munich, after having spent a few days in Berlin: evocative cities in Olympic history. One evokes a highly orchestrated attempt to bring glory to the nation, while the other evokes murder, or at any rate, hostage-taking and a botched rescue, also charged with the desires and embarrassments of national redemption. Ach, armen Deutschen. But there were other things, that can be described as either flies in the ointment, or simply joyful. Jesse Owens, for instance. Also in Berlin in 1936, the Indian hockey team beat Germany 8-1 in the final in front of a full house. (Leni Riefenstahl generously included a part of the match in her film *Olympia*.)

Indeed, it can be argued that in the past, Indian sport delivered the occasional dose of joy; glory was not on the menu. Indian athletes inspired affection rather than awe. P.T. Usha, one of the few truly great athletes India has produced (the others being Sachin Tendulkar and Dhyan Chand), never won an Olympic medal; yet her run in Los Angeles in 1984 was as moving as any gold. ‘Losing’ a race by one-one-hundredths of a second is more than heartbreaking: it is reasonable cause for a wry contemplation of the interrelationship of mathematics, technology

and truth in the modern world. Nevertheless, Usha's run in LA was a matter of joy. Before her, there was Milkha Singh in Rome in 1960 and Mushtaq Ali in Manchester (in 1936, coincidentally). 'Relaxing?' a friendly journalist asked Milkha by the hotel pool. 'No, Milkha Singh,' he is reported to have replied earnestly. In Amsterdam in 1928, the Indian hockey players defeated the United States 24-1 in another Olympic final. The Dutch spectators (another full house) were hugely entertained, as, of course, were Indian supporters back home. It is said that the only American goal was scored when Indian goalkeeper Richard Allen was off the field signing autographs. That kind of humor in sport is incompatible with glory, which is a prickly, deadly serious and mean-spirited thing.

Between the joy and the glory is an aesthetic chasm that is also a chasm of language. Who in Europe talks about glory anymore? The Serbs, and perhaps the French right, but not many others. The English would soon start to giggle. (The 'queen' parachuting from the helicopter at the Olympic opening ceremony gave the game away once again: glory has been transmuted, thankfully, into a satire of power and pomp.) Few Germans would even think in terms of national glory, and that is the most attractive thing about present-day Germany, aside from Weissbier on the banks of the Isar in the summertime. The German football team in the 2010 World Cup was a thing of joy, not glory.

Yet in India, the rhetoric of national glory has not only persisted, but expanded in scale and scope, grabbing larger and larger swaths of public discourse. It might be argued that this is a problem of English-as-a-second language: that the translated meaning (i.e., what is written and said) has not kept pace with the political meaning (what is thought). It may indeed be that the Indian understanding of national glory is significantly different from, say, the French in 1914, or the German in 1938. But there is more to it than that. There is an ugly innocence that the Indian middle class shares with its counterparts in America and Israel, and this is something that the loss of empire, two world wars, genocide and a partial rethinking of nationhood has eroded in Europe: innocence about what the defenders of freedom/empire actually do when they are doing their jobs, innocence about what has been done to the Palestinian people, innocence about the consequences of the Armed Forces Special Powers Act. (The last signed into being by Nehru, although, one likes to imagine, with a grimace and a pat of the bronze hand of Lincoln on his desk.)

Such innocence is fundamentally primitive, childish and allergic to irony. Not only does it produce the delusions about butt-chinned men 'saving the world' that remain a staple of American culture, it's the sort of thing that once led Europeans to celebrate the outbreak of the Great War, and that leads Indians to put garlands on new tanks without giving a thought to what a tank shell does to a human body. The notion that the body will always be that of an enemy soldier and not of a child, or even your own, is part of this innocence. Garlanding tanks and doing a little puja for a new warship has very little to do with ancient rituals of worshipping weapons and everything to do with the modern fetish of nationalist display, in which nationhood itself is fundamentally innocent and pure. The unconsidered images of dismembered bodies and the public images of flower-bedecked tanks constitute the visual aesthetic of national glory, which makes it possible to imagine Olympic events as battles for collective validation.

The Olympic 'movement' itself has been deeply schizophrenic about these things, since from its inception it has emphasized both international competition and depoliticized individual effort, while remaining hazy about the connection between them. Is sport a metaphor of war, or of peace? Was the 'Black Power' salute by Tommie Smith and John Carlo in Mexico City controversial because it violated the Olympic truce, or because it blocked the appropriation of their medals by the grubby hands of national glory and constituted an intolerable counter-aesthetic? Did Jesse Owens bring 'glory' to the United States? Few Americans would have thought so in 1936, and Owens was eventually remembered for having achieved something much more important, which was muddying up the rhetoric of national glory. Not even the Indian hockey teams of those years could bring an uncomplicated glory: there were too many Anglo-Indian players for that (including the missing goalkeeper in Los Angeles), and Anglo-Indians do not fit easily into the concept of the Indian nation. Was Richard Allen Indian? Was Norman Pritchard? Who remembers old Norm, anyway? What Olympic organizers, cheerleading journalists and commentators on Internet forums tend to avoid is not politics as such, or even individuals. They recoil from loose cannons.

It is, I hope, clear in this essay that I am not at all opposed to nationalism in sport. Nationalism is the spice of sport; it would be impossible, otherwise, to take pleasure in a five-day game of

cricket. The citizenship of P.T. Usha and Mary Kom, not to mention Sachin Tendulkar, is central to the joy they have provided. Indeed, sport is probably the only setting in which a modern individual can enjoy his membership in a collective without killing somebody or having a leg blown off. A nationalist with an air gun is almost always preferable to a nationalist with a real gun. I am not even opposed to tanks in all circumstances. A tank, like a turd, has a function in the world. I am griping, because I have nothing better to do, about a particular way of talking about nationally organized sport, and a particular way of picturing tanks (festooned with flowers like a newlyweds' Ambassador). I am griping about an aesthetic that is crass, undignified, unnecessary, destructive of the very norms of liberal citizenship that make nationhood worthwhile, and ultimately inseparable from failures of the worst kind.

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Teaching Mohammed Ghandi at CUNY

Indira Gandhi, a CUNY undergraduate recently wrote on his final exam, was the wife of Mohammed Ghandi. This startling bit of information reached me in the same week that a friend who teaches at Princeton raved about brilliant screenplays and short stories his freshmen had just written about Bahadur Shah Zafar and communal riots.

I reacted somewhat ungraciously to my colleague's joy. Taking pleasure in the excellence of one's students is only natural, of course. But the week of final exams, for professors no less than for students, can have overtones of *Hum ne maana, yeh zamaana, dard ki jagir hai*. (For non-

aficionados of *filmi shairi*, that's "I accepted that this age is the fiefdom of pain.") Needless to say, the pain is worse in the trenches. In those circumstances, for Princeton faculty to exult "Where do they make these kids?" is a bit like buying a car at a Mercedes dealership, exclaiming about what a nice car it is, and asking (rhetorically) where it was made. But mostly, my *dard* had to do with the discovery of Mohammed Ghandi in my classroom.

To be fair to CUNY undergraduates, howlers like that are rare. We usually get one per class per semester. ("Buddha? Have we heard of this guy?" greeted me in my first year.) And usually, there is a prosaic explanation. The student answering the question about Mrs. Gandhi, for instance, had not come to class very often. Nearly every other student knew who Indira Gandhi was (although one did try to cover her bases by describing her as "the daughter of Nehru Gandhi"), because they had not been absent the day I lectured about Indian politics in the mid-1960s. Nevertheless, a missed lecture is not much of an excuse, since anybody who has finished high school can reasonably be expected to have heard of Buddha, and even to know that 'Mohammed Ghandi' is not an alternative spelling of 'Mahatma Gandhi.'

To say that the public schools of urban America have major problems is to understate the obvious, and I will not get into those issues in this short essay. I will limit myself to noting that at CUNY, where training schoolteachers is a large part of our mission, we contribute to those problems by taking in, and then sending down, people who are sometimes shockingly unqualified to teach. Still, bad teachers and poor funding are not adequate explanations for the crisis of secondary education in this country; if the institutions are at fault, so are the clients. I am not talking about problems of 'intelligence' or even about learning disabilities. I have in mind a more diffuse problem of culture that is laid bare at an institution like CUNY, which seeks to provide – or rather, confront – the products of urban high schools with a standard liberal-arts university curriculum.

The symptom of this culture is a pervasive indifference to academic work that sometimes reaches the level of hostility. Its commonest form is not mistakes on examination papers, but missing class. On the first day of every semester, I make an earnest – and, I hope, frightening –

speech about the importance of regular attendance, the correlation between attendance and grades, and so on. Students look surprised and skeptical, and many do not shake that skepticism even after the results of the midterm examinations have driven my point home. Come to class every day? What an idea. In one class, I encountered a sardarni complete with turban (something you rarely see on Sikh women in India, but immigrant subjectivities often call for overcompensation): highly intelligent, reasonably well-informed, confident, articulate, entirely promising. The A was there for the asking. Yet she displayed a curious habit of skipping class every once in a while, ignoring the polite warnings. On the final exam her luck ran out and the missed lectures caught up with her. Schade.

Examinations themselves become rituals of cultural revelation. Students will simply fail to show up for an exam, without prior notice or subsequent anxiety, and expect to be given a make-up test. During any two-hour final examination, some students will stroll in half an hour late, not looking the least bit flustered. During the same test, a few will hand in their blue-books thirty minutes into the session, so that some students are leaving while others are still walking in. Nobody cries, hyperventilates, goes into convulsions or faints, in the way that thirty or ninety minutes of forfeited examination time might trigger at, say, Princeton, not to mention an Indian university. It's just not that big of a deal.

There are, of course, gratifying exceptions. In general, there are two kinds of exceptional students at the CUNY colleges. One is the exceptionally diligent. In the past semester, I had two young women in my class who had taken the course, and failed, the previous year. They came back, as failed students sometimes do, to try again. But unusually, they tried very hard, beginning with identifying where they had gone wrong the last time. One contacted me before the semester began to ask for reading assignments, and did not miss a single class. The other, sullenly silent last year except for occasional displays of 'attitude,' was impressive with her eager participation this time around. (She began the semester by sending me a note reading "I'm back! Boo!", but I refused to take the bait.) Both students finished the semester with B's.

CUNY is, indeed, a mecca of second chances. It is a place where people who have made a mess of their initial encounter with higher education, but become more determined and disciplined, can start over. They include faculty with burned fingers and broken ladders, but mainly it's the students: the public-school teacher's aid who has realized she can do better, as well as the Olympic-level show-jumper, so academically driven that I would tease her about it in class (she was one of the few who *did* hyperventilate about the clock during exams), who writes an essay on gender and class identity that is so good that I read it aloud to my mother, herself a former professor. When they are aware of their limitations, they tend to rise above them. Teaching such students is in some ways more satisfying than teaching the ones that shine immediately and effortlessly. But even the easy shiners – the other exceptional type at CUNY – have a tendency to stumble at the finish line, tripped up by the limitations of what we have been able to do for them, and by the culture of Mohammed Ghandi.

It might be argued, not without merit, that the 'culture' that I have in mind is nothing more or less than a culture of poverty: that absenteeism and tardiness are bread-and-butter realities for a student body that comes substantially from the working class and small-business backgrounds. Many students have jobs that necessarily take priority over classes, and/or must take care of children or other family members. But it quickly becomes apparent to the professor who those students are: they are slightly frantic, apologetic, and will almost always explain the problem. They are rarely the casual late-comers and no-shows. One of my best, most serious, students this past semester was a mailman, who would – as often as not – rush into class late, postal uniform soaked in sweat, mumbling with a wry smile that he had not been able to get away from work in time. Another student, after having missed a couple of classes, waited sheepishly in the corridor with her little daughter for permission to enter the classroom; she had not been able to find a babysitter. She wrote a fair paper analyzing Norman Mailer's *The Armies of the Night* from a Gandhian perspective, comparing (Mahatma, not Mohammed) Gandhi's utilization of the press in the Salt Satyagraha with the handling of the media by anti-war marchers in Washington in 1967. No CUNY faculty member that I know is unsympathetic to such students or unwilling to accommodate their needs, even if it means turning an indulgent eye to a seven-year-old in the classroom. (The children, I should say, are almost always impeccably behaved.)

The majority of the absent and the late, however, have no excuses beyond dead grandmothers. ("I had to go to Guyana for the funeral," said a student who had missed an exam and was demanding a make-up. I asked for a boarding pass stub or ticket receipt, which was not forthcoming.) They don't come to class because they have better things to do; the notion that school is the most important thing in the life of a college student is not a part of their cultural make-up. The dynamics of a commuter school, which is not one's home like a residential college but a place that must compete with the obligations of home, come into play. Their families are often struggling but they are rarely destitute. Families do, however, become a problem in ways that are unimaginable at Princeton or Berkeley. They are often profoundly ambivalent about university education. In an abstract sense, they 'support' it and want their children to have the degrees that come from it. They typically make the necessary financial sacrifices. But at critical moments, they fail to provide the necessary push, or actively get in the way.

It is, for instance, a ubiquitous experience for faculty at Queens College, and presumably the other CUNY campuses as well, to find themselves trying – and failing – to persuade their best students to look beyond New York City for graduate school. Queens may be New York's most ethnically diverse borough, but it is also, paradoxically, highly provincial. (The other boroughs are no different, for the class of New Yorkers that goes to CUNY.) The world beyond the bridges and tunnels might as well be Uranus. Parents balk, and not just with girls. Last year, one of my students was accepted into the Ph.D. program in history at the University of Edinburgh. His India-born parents refused to let him go, although they would have been quite willing to finance his studies had he been accepted into the CUNY Graduate Center. Another student – a vivacious, sardonic, absurdly promising young woman, also of South Asian origin – was, likewise, given to understand that while marrying 'out of state' was acceptable, studying 'out of state' was not. A brilliant Orthodox Jewish girl who could, potentially, have entered any doctoral program in the country was told firmly that she would remain in New York City and study accountancy.

These restrictions are, to some extent, the peculiarities of immigrants who come from outside the university-educated upper classes of their old countries. Having been dislocated, dispersed and stripped of social status once by emigration, they are reluctant to see another dislocation, dispersal and demoralization, brought about this time by the prospect of children moving away to 'find themselves' at distant universities, beyond the cultural oversight of parents and

husbands. What is liberating to the ‘model minority’ at Stanford and Columbia is deeply threatening, and not quite as important, to the classes – often from the same ethnic backgrounds – that sell the model minority their ethnic groceries. For the latter, higher education is not just about upward mobility, it is also disruptive: a place and a current where one can tread gingerly, but not become immersed or swept away.

For professors in the classroom, this ambivalence on the part of the clientele poses all kinds of problems, which I flippantly summarized as *dard*. Faculty in the CUNY colleges come from the same undergraduate and graduate programs, and usually the same class backgrounds, that feed any other university in this country. Dealing with a student body that does not share the standard priorities of university education – manifested in very basic things like coming to class, taking notes, and taking examinations seriously – is almost inevitably a shock, and it would be disingenuous to represent this as something other than a type of culture shock. (I would add grinning inanely at your cell phone to the list of shocking behavior, but I suspect that happens at Princeton too, and that my horror is generational rather than class-based.)

Beyond culture shock, and far more serious, are the problems of pedagogy. There are, I think, two issues here: one tactical, the other strategic. Tactically, it becomes very difficult to teach the serious and the semi-serious, the capable and the severely underprepared, in the same classroom and from the same syllabus. Mohammed Ghandi inevitably imposes restrictions on what can reasonably be assigned and what questions can be asked, either in discussions or in examinations. There is no point in assigning a book or article that two students will read and one will understand. For the sake of Mohammed Ghandi, readings are cut to the bone, which necessarily undermines the education that we might offer to those who *can* – and would like to – read, discuss and write at a much higher level. These students, like the young Indo-Guyanese-American woman who wrote [this paper on Orwell and Kipling](#), then become lost exceptions, awkwardly stranded in classes where nobody else is on the same page. Strategically, it becomes difficult to answer the question of just what CUNY’s undergraduate programs are supposed to achieve. If the goal is to train university graduates of a recognizable standard, then the current arrangement is seriously flawed; those of our students who reach that standard do so in spite of the system, not because of it. If, on the other hand, the goal is merely – as one colleague put it –

to ‘make them a little better,’ then is it reasonable to deploy the title, curriculum and credentials of the university? There are no answers – nothing practical, at any rate.

There are, of course, all kinds of imaginable institutional fixes. CUNY is a sprawling, bloated structure that (except at the level of doctoral study) desperately prioritizes quantity over quality, so changing that would be an obvious place to begin. We can call, quite reasonably, for significantly higher standards for admission, a clear separation of missions between the community colleges and the four-year colleges, the early and aggressive identification of the severely challenged and the promising, and their separation into discrete academic tracks, smaller classes for seminars and writing workshops, and the provision of discussion sections for all lecture courses. When grading papers, I am often struck by the phenomenon of the half-understood concept, which is also, ironically, a gateway into unexpected insight. Answering a question about nationalist thought in India and Pakistan, several students wrote that while Hindutva is incompatible with secular democracy, the Two-Nation Theory is not. It was clear from their answers that they had only a partial understanding of the Two-Nation Theory, and the fault is undoubtedly mine to share. But it was also evident that they were not entirely wrong and had stumbled into a complex analysis. The only way to unearth and unpack these things in time is discussion in a small group, in addition to the usual three hours of lecture each week. But additional hours of instruction and the small-group format are expensive, beyond the financial reach of CUNY in the age of budget cuts. And other reforms – higher admission standards, for instance, or the dismantling of CUNY altogether to restore the autonomy of the individual colleges – are politically untenable.

The political aspect of the problem is, of course, inseparable from the financial: CUNY is paid for with votes just as much as it is paid for with money. As an institution, it is curiously representative of post-colonial democracy, in which the Brahmin institution of the university has been taken over by Dalits – and the notorious Mohammed Ghandi – for their own purposes and imaginations, creating a hybrid that is necessarily somewhat painful for the pundits. But that pain is inseparable from unusual compensations that are also hybrids: turbaned sardarnis, rebellious girls in hijabs, intellectually inclined mailmen anticipating the demise of the postal service, retired dentists who remember Kissinger’s stance on the Bangladesh war, a brilliant young feminist who asks, worriedly, if there is a lot of violence in the Mahabharata before she

begins to read Vyasa's poem. CUNY is a backwater, but it is also a frontier, the Deep Space Nine of higher education, and sometimes it becomes necessary to remind ourselves of that.

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Posted by [Satadru Sen](#) at [11:46 PM](#) [Links to this post](#)

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Standing in the Middle of Life (with My Pants Behind Me)

I'm standing in the middle of life with my pains behind me...

is a line that, for many years, I heard as “I’m standing in the middle of life with my pants behind me.” It made more sense that way. Whether a thirty-three-year-old woman can credibly claim to be “standing in the middle of life” is a reasonable question, but in fairness to Chrissie Hynde, she grew very convincingly into the song. (Part of being middle-aged, for me, is the startling realization that CH is now in her sixties.) But even at the outset, I was able to grasp that when Ms. Hynde described leaving her pants behind she had just joined the ranks of the procreationally disposed, and that parental nakedness was a ritual of snarlingly meditative middle age.

By and by, other songwriters offered further suggestions about the meaning of middle age. Moving to the east coast, for instance, was nicely foreshadowed by an annoying Irishman who wrote one of the finest songs ever recorded about New York City:

Hit an iceberg in my life / but I'm still afloat

Lose your balance / lose your wife

In the queue for the lifeboat...

Just got a place in New York.

Having got a place in New York under more or less the above-mentioned circumstances, I went whole hog and knocked up the first woman who insisted. The results are, on the one hand, a heart-warming affirmation of life, renewal, magic, innocence, and so on. On the other hand, it is a chastening discovery of what lies beyond the pants one leaves behind.

The social side of having reproduced, which I had dreaded, has turned out to be quite bearable. Some of it is indeed as bad as I had expected: there have been the inevitable "Now you see how instantly, wonderfully and irrevocably your life has changed, don't you? Well, don't you?" congratulations from assorted parents, indifferently pleased at the sight of a parent-basher biting the dust. Anything short of a sheepish admission of reformed foolishness marks you as a Nazi. The smug admonishment is often accompanied by effusive praise, as if I – or they, who joined "the club" earlier and apparently with less ambivalence – had performed something other than a fairly commonplace biological function. But with a few exceptions, even my relatives have been reasonable and restrained. They merely urge me to acknowledge that the baby is cute, which I am happy to do. They also declare earnestly that it looks like me. (The wife and the pediatrician did the same.) I stand reassured, although it looks like a baby to me.

I also stand extended in both directions, albeit ambiguously. In the new monkey-baby, I cannot help seeing the fossils of old family trees. There are residues here of a dead father, dead grandparents, faces known and unknown: schoolteachers and bookworms from Dhaka and Pabna, an orphan girl from Benaras tormented by reluctant caretakers, a young foreman (once similarly tormented) in the Kidderpore docks, shadowy priests from UP and pioneers from Andhra Pradesh and Karnataka, and even further back, almost unimaginable shapes that crossed the Hindu Kush in rags or the Arabian Sea in rafts. There are Slovak and German peasants, and possibly a Native American tree in Algonquian country that French fur-trappers had climbed. There is (my mother was told by a gossipy in-law) a similar rumor of an amorous Portuguese pirate in the Ganges delta. I have now done my bit, given them all a slightly longer lease on a sort of life, kicked the football down the field, pushed the fossils and chromosomes a few years further into the future. And in the process, I have bought insurance for my own fossil: the creeping sense of mortality that marks the beginning of middle age, the panicky fear of one's own approaching death that sets in as each year passes a little faster than the one before, has been assuaged somewhat. Such self-extension by diaper-changing is the satisfaction of an embarrassingly animal urge, but the acceptance of one's bestial-democratic instincts is quite appropriate for those who have dutifully read their Subaltern Studies.

But mostly I stand humbled. Not by the 'miracle of life' or any of that rubbish, but by the inadequacy of middle-aged manhood. When my daughter is asleep in my arms and I look at her face, I realize that nothing that I can do will protect her adequately, or at all, from what lies ahead: the cruelty of strangers, the callousness of boyfriends, frat parties, failed marriages, ungrateful children, old age, irremediable mistakes, loneliness, death. When I look at the two-weeks-old baby, I cannot help imagining her at seventy. (Not for nothing the Bengali tendency to call little girls *buri*.) So I printed out Kahlil Gibran's *On Children* and taped it to the fridge. This too is embarrassing; *On Children* nearly took on the status of a greeting-card when Gibran, along with Spock, became one half of the gay couple that raised the Baby Boomers. But whereas the Boomers embraced the poem as a manifesto of the liberation of the child, I love it for liberating the parent. To be resigned to being unable to protect and preserve what you love: that may very well be the trick to standing in the middle of life, with or without your pants.

November 16, 2011

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A Denied Visa and a Girl on a Pole

Just over a month ago, the Canadian government made headlines by refusing entry visas to a handful of Indian applicants. The disappointed individuals were nondescript enough, including a bureaucrat in the Intelligence Bureau and officers in the Border Security Force (BSF) and the Central Reserve Police Force (CRPF), a paramilitary organization used most frequently to deal with ‘internal disturbances.’ The Canadian High Commission provided a forthright explanation: membership in these organizations was incompatible with Canadian principles of human rights. The government in New Delhi was enraged, made loud noises of protest, and Ottawa quickly backed down and apologized. The embarrassing episode was blamed on overzealous staff in the High Commission, and Indian democracy and human rights were pronounced to be adequately Canadian in their benevolence. The would-be tourists presumably got their visas. K.P. Nayar, [writing in The Telegraph](#), praised the Canadian bureaucracy for its transparency and simultaneously sneered at it for having given in so often to bleeding-heart human-rights activists that it was practically ungovernmental.

Let me begin by noting that there is nothing Canadian about being hung up on human rights. The country has a historical record – and a [recent record](#) – of racism and racial thuggery that may fall short of American standards, but [not by much](#). So the high commission officials who initially denied the Indians their visas do not have a particularly high moral ground to stand on. At the same time, it must be conceded that the Canadian government does, at least occasionally, demonstrate some sensitivity to issues of human rights, and that its response to the Indian visa applicants was consistent with that sensitivity. Two questions that remain are whether the Canucks violated Indian sovereignty by raising the issue of human rights in such an undiplomatic and hypocritical way, and whether such violations are to be countenanced. The answer to both, I suggest, is an unequivocal yes.

Where I lived in India, there was a CRPF barrack not far from my home. In the cool of the early mornings, I would sometimes see the CRPF men running on the road that connected my home and my school. The *jawans* in their shorts and singlets did not look particularly menacing. They carried no guns, they never approached us; like Indian soldiers in general, they existed in their own enclave, separate from and only occasionally visible from the world of middle-class civilians. There was nothing about them that might suggest the barbaric. Yet [this barbarity](#), too, is the face of the Indian state, and of the modern nation-state in general.

How are we to explain that the Canadian state occasionally makes a fuss about barbarism, and that not only does the Indian state not make a fuss, its defenders scoff about such fussiness? Part of the answer might be found in a split that the historian Partha Chatterjee has identified within the nature of the Indian state: the coexistence of a ‘discourse of rights’ and a ‘discourse of policy.’ The Indian nation-state is not identically a state of all its citizens. Its inventors and investors are an elite which longs for certain things that appear to be universally desirable: middle-class comforts, geopolitical status, military power, clean straight roads and shiny airports. They also care about democracy and constitutional liberties, about judicial procedure, about limits on police power and about the invisibility of soldiers in civilian society. Chatterjee calls them ‘proper citizens.’ Proper citizens in India are not necessarily cynical people, but like every elite in the vanguard of a state that anticipates the modernity of its people, they live with an inescapable dilemma, which has to do with those other Indians: the ‘improper’ citizens whose slums that encroach upon roads and runways, who stubbornly reject the notion that the countryside is a collection of minerals and national parks, who remain indifferent to the need to compete with China and to the ‘national interest.’ They are at best a nuisance and at worse a threat like the ‘Maoists.’

The Indian state approaches the former category of citizens with a model of governance that emphasizes rights, but regards the latter as the objects of policy: as problems to be solved, ideally by absorption into the circle of proper citizens, but more commonly by displacement and arbitrary police action, and sometimes by torture and murder. This inevitably produces various levels of dehumanization, among which the image of a dead woman casually slung from a pole is

by no means the most extreme. Such dehumanization is a basic reality of life in unevenly modern societies. North Americans might need to go some distance to discover them – to Bagram, Abu Ghraib, My Lai, the inner city, the past – but there are Abu Ghraibs in India every day. The arbitrary, extra-legal, dehumanizing deployment of violence been a part of the project of nation-building since Nehru winced at the thought of his soldiers burning Naga villages and raping Mizo women but could advance no real alternative. It can be argued that this is precisely why the CRPF exists: it allows the regular military to distance itself somewhat from the dirty work of policy-implementation. The CRPF is no more a terrorist organization than the Mounties are a terrorist organization, but the former supports an ongoing project of social transformation that necessarily relies on extralegal violence. Police torture is ubiquitous in India and the middle class does not bat an eye. It is seen – or more accurately, *not* seen and only tacitly acknowledged, because proper citizens do not want to see such things – as an unavoidable aspect of governance. It is only when the police go too far and begin targeting the children of the middle class, as they did during the Naxalite movement in the early 1970s, that there are murmurs of alarm, calls for restraint, literary outpourings, and so on.

K.P. Nayar's reaction to the Canadian visa incident makes very good sense in this light. Canadians no longer have to deal with rebellious peasants (except in Afghanistan), so they can inhabit a modern state in which everybody is a proper citizen, enveloped by a discourse of rights. They are not engaged in the aggressive pursuit of superpower status or overly prickly about their sovereignty, partly because they are already at or close to the center of things, and partly because they suffer from neither the pretensions nor the insecurities with which the ex-colonial Indian bourgeoisie is infused. They can, thus, 'give in' to liberal activists at every turn, conciliate international forums, and coddle their Quebecois separatists instead of 'disappearing' them in the manner of Siddhartha Shankar Ray and K.P.S. Gill. In denying visas to Indian policemen they are deeply hypocritical, but it is not their hypocrisy that bothers Nayar. It is an effeteness – the effeteness of those comfortably ensconced in a society in which rights and policy are not mutually hostile concepts – of which the Indian enthusiast of a hard state and shiny modernity is simultaneously contemptuous and envious.

What can be done for the victims of their enthusiasm? It is impractical to ask for a radical ideological shift in which middle-class Indians suddenly become Gandhians. As long as the

nation-state – a middle-class fetish – persists alongside a large population that is marginal to nationhood, we will see more dead women being carried by soldiers like hunting trophies in an operation appropriately named Green Hunt, the continued normalization of police brutality, and the effective existence of two states within the same society. It is equally silly to imagine that the nationalist classes can be ejected from the offices in which policy is made. The ‘Maoists’ can win a few skirmishes and carry out the occasional act of terrorism, but they don't have a ghost of a chance against the power of the state, which has already begun to withdraw its military helicopters from UN peacekeeping missions so that they can be deployed closer to home. The riff-raff may eventually cease to embarrass the proper citizens, but I suspect that will happen only after India, like Canada, has achieved a measure of evenness by ruthlessly flattening its more uneven Indians.

In the meantime, however, the best thing that can happen is for Canada and other countries to keep rejecting visa applications. The problem cannot be solved but it can be mitigated. Let the Indian government reject some visa applications too, and not just those of Pakistanis. Let boycotts fly and sanctions ring. Hypocritical and inconsistent it might be, but it would not be meaningless or ineffective. George W. Bush was responsible for astronomical violence and misery, but no amount of praise is too high for his State Department for denying a visa to Narendra Modi. These things don't always stop the barbarians, but it gives them pause. (There are, I'm told, several countries that Henry Kissinger did not dare to visit after the 1970s, and Israeli generals have learned to stay on the plane when in Britain. [Sakineh Mohammadi Ashtiani is still alive](#) in Iran.) The defenders of national sovereignty – like Nayar – may find this unpalatable, but national sovereignty is usually the enemy of the rights of the individual citizen, who needs all the friends he or she can find, regardless of where those friends are located.

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Posted by [Satadru Sen](#) at [12:54 PM](#)

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